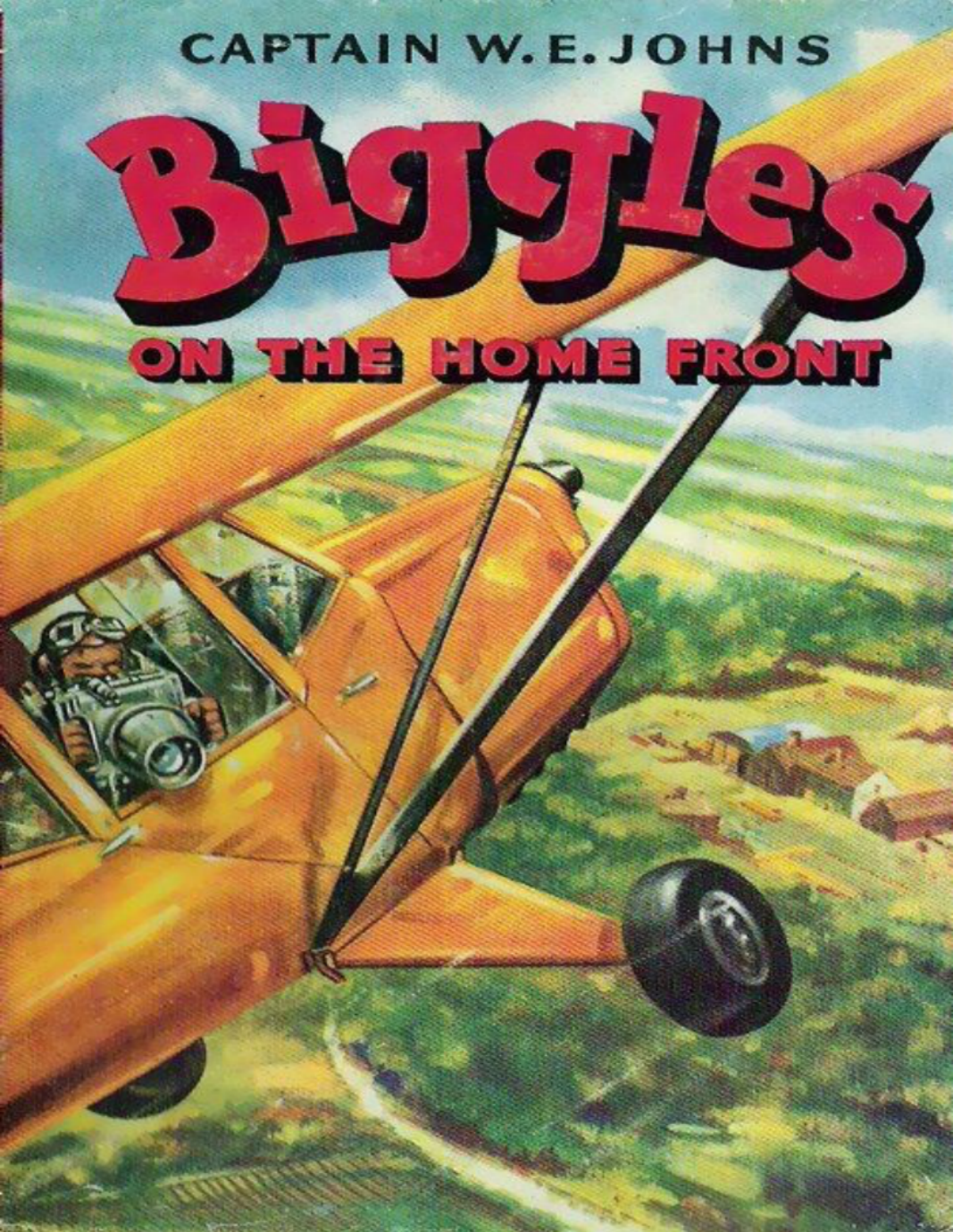


CAPTAIN W.E. JOHNS

# Biggles

ON THE HOME FRONT



# CONTENTS

SYNOPSIS

CHAPTER I: INSPECTOR GASKIN CALLS

CHAPTER II: THE BAIT

CHAPTER III: WHEELS WITHIN WHEELS

CHAPTER IV: GIVE AND TAKE

CHAPTER V: A DAY IN THE COUNTRY

CHAPTER VI: A DANGEROUS ENCOUNTER

CHAPTER VII: ACCIDENT OR MURDER?

CHAPTER VIII: BERTIE CLIMBS A TREE

CHAPTER IX: ALGY SPEAKS HIS MIND

CHAPTER X: LAXTER MAKES A PROPOSITION

CHAPTER XI: NEWS FOR INSPECTOR GASKIN

CHAPTER XII: THE TRAP

CHAPTER XIII: NEW MOVES

CHAPTER XIV: WEARY WORK

CHAPTER XV: THE END OF THE TRAIL

# **BIGGLES ON THE HOME FRONT**

An adventure of Biggles and. his Air Police Pilots in and around London

Inspector Gaskin of the C.I.D., worried by a crop of jewel robberies in London, knew very well what difficulties crooks were up against when it came to disposing of stolen gems. Yet those who might have pulled these recent jobs were certainly getting big money for their loot. "They're spending it like it dropped from heaven," he told Biggles. "Where are they getting it from?"

# CHAPTER I

## INSPECTOR GASKIN CALLS

AS the door of the Air Police Operations Room opened Biggles glanced up from the map which, with his police pilots, he was studying in connection with some recently published aircraft endurance ranges.

"Hello, Inspector," he greeted cheerfully, as the burly, dark-suited figure of Inspector Gaskin, of the Criminal Investigation Department, New Scotland Yard, advanced slowly into the office. "Take a pew."

"Thanks," grunted the detective.

"What's on your mind?" inquired Biggles. "You look like a man who's lost half a crown and found a penny."

"I feel," answered the square-faced police officer, heavily, as he dropped into the chair that Ginger pulled out for him, "like a man who's just seen his last quid go down the drain."

Biggles smiled. "On a fine spring day like this? Never mind. Another one'll turn up. It'll all come right in the end."

"It doesn't look that way to me at present," asserted Gaskin, lugubriously.

"What's the headache?"

"If I knew the answer to that mebbe I could handle it." Producing a well-smoked pipe the Inspector began with great deliberation to fill it.

"Handle what?" asked Biggles.

"Don't you ever read the papers?"

"When I have time."

"If you did," rejoined the detective, "you might have noticed that over the past few months the Yard has had enough smacks in the eye to give anyone doing my job a permanent squint."

"From what direction did these smacks come?"

"From several directions, but all jewel robberies. Big stuff. Fifteen thousand quid's worth from one house; ten thousand from another; five thousand from a block of flats in Mayfair, and a tray of rings worth a couple of thousand from a shop in Bond Street. Close on a hundred thousand pounds' worth altogether, and we haven't a clue as to where it's gone, much less recovered any of it. It still goes on. I lie awake o' nights wondering where the next crack'll come from. The Insurance Companies are beginning to squeal."

Biggles grimaced. "I'm not surprised. How's it being done? I mean, what's the particular method?"

"Smash and grab, using stolen cars, and climbers."

"That must mean there's more than one gang at it."

"At least two parties, but not necessarily gangs. The climbers and flat raiders may work alone; but, of course, it needs a gang of three or four to work a smash-and-grab racket."

Biggles looked puzzled. "But what's gone wrong? I thought you could identify these specialists by their methods."

"So we can, more or less, but lately they've been particularly fly, almost as if someone has been giving them a tip or two. It's no use suspecting if you can't lay hands on evidence to prove."

Biggles reached for a cigarette. "Well, all I can say is, I'm glad this angle of crime isn't up my street."

"You don't know how lucky you are," rejoined Gaskin bitterly. "I know you have some big jobs to handle, but with you they mostly happen only once. My brand of crooks may not be such big game as yours, but I have them with me always. It's a war that never ends. From time to time I take prisoners but there are always others on the outside. And by the time I've got those rounded up those who were inside are out again."

Biggles smiled. "It must be tough. But carry on. Get it off your chest if it'll ease the pain." He eyed Gaskin shrewdly. "Or had you a better reason than that for coming up the stairs to tell me about it?"

"I thought you might have one of those brainwaves—"

"Now, wait a minute," broke in Biggles. "You're the professional sleuth. You've been at it for what—thirty years?"

"Thirty-two."

"That, aside from aviation, must make me look like an amateur."

"I have an idea aviation might come into this."

"I see," said Biggles, slowly. "That's different."

"It's only a hunch, with nothing to back it up."

"No matter. Even a hunch has to start from somewhere. Go ahead."

"It'd mean explaining the whole set-up of how my sort of crooks work."

"That's all right. It so happens we're not pushed for time, and I'm always willing to learn. You've an idea. Out with it. I'm listening."

"I've come to the conclusion there's a new man in the business."

"A new *man*. But surely he wouldn't mix smash and grab with climbing drainpipes. The two things don't go together."

"They might if there was one set of brains behind 'em. That's the only answer I can arrive at to account for this sudden burst of activity in the so-called underworld. It's my guess that the trouble is at the receiving end. There's a new man on the job and he's paying fair prices."

Biggles frowned. "I don't quite understand what you're getting at. By receiver I take it you mean the man who receives the stolen goods, commonly known as a fence."

"You've got it."

"But is the fence all that important?"

"He's the most important man in crime, and he's also the hardest to catch. You've got to catch him with the goods on him, or be able to prove that he's had the goods and knew the stuff was stolen. And that takes some doing."

"So I can imagine," nodded Biggles.

“You see,” went on the Inspector, relighting his pipe, which had gone out, “we often get a squeak from the underworld about a job, either before or after it’s been pulled off. Forget what you’ve heard about honour among thieves. There isn’t any. One crook will put in a whisper about another, or one gang will double-cross another gang if they think it’s to their advantage. Or may be out of revenge. But it’s almost an unwritten law that a crook must never shop a fence.”

“Why? Why should a fence be sort of sacred?”

“Because, don’t you see, if crooks shopped him they’d be cutting their own throats. How would they dispose of their swag? They seldom know the value of the stuff they pinch; but the fence knows. It’s his job to know. He makes his own price, and as far as the thief is concerned it’s a matter of take it or leave it. As the crook is usually short of money, he takes it. It may surprise you to know that a crook is lucky to get even a quarter of the value of the stuff he pinches. Ten per cent is more usual. Which means that for a thousand quid’s worth of sparklers he gets a hundred. And even out of that he may have codgers, and other people, to pay.”

“That’s a lovely word—codger,” put in Bertie Lissie. “What’s a codger?”

“The underworld name for a watcher. The curse of that is, a crook tries to get youngsters to do it because they’re less likely to arouse suspicion. These silly kids stick their necks out for a quid or two and so take the first step on the road to Dartmoor; because it’s only a question of time before they find themselves involved in bigger jobs. Then there may be the car thief to pay, too, in case one’s necessary for a quick getaway.”

“Why not use his own?” queried Ginger.

“Because we should spot it. The crook prefers a stolen one. That’s done by a specialist who knows how to start any make of car. For ten pounds he’ll provide anything from a sports car to a van and park it where you want it. For smash and grab raids the car thief will fix a tow-bar and a chain with a hook on it for tearing down shutters and steel grilles over jewellers’ windows.”

“Very interesting,” murmured Biggles. “But let’s get back to the receiver, the fence, if that’s the man you want.”

The Inspector resumed. “As I was saying, the thief has to take what he can get for the loot. Imagine the feelings of a crook who has risked a five years’ sentence to get a parcel of gems. The fence gives him, say, a couple of hundred quid for ‘em. The next day the crook reads in the newspapers that they were worth three thousand. What can he do about it? Nothing. Knowing he’ll be under suspicion he daren’t keep the stuff on him for a moment longer than is necessary.”

“Do these crooks ever go back to the fence and say they’ve been cheated?”

“If they do the fence has the answers ready, and they’re not unreasonable. He argues the stuff is hot—red hot—and if it should be found in his possession he’s likely to get ten years. Again, receiving is a long-term business. He may have to keep the stuff for months, maybe years, waiting for

the fuss to die down before he tries to sell it. Of course, he may recover part of his outlay by taking the gems out of their settings and melting down the gold. That's easily disposed of. But he has to be more careful with the stones even if they're re-cut, because there's always a chance that an expert will recognize them."

"You make it sound as if jewel stealing is poor business."

"It is. I know crooks who could make more money by going straight, but some queer bug in their brains won't let 'em."

"All right. Let's get down to brass tacks. What do you think has happened to set off this spate of robberies?"

"I've told you. I believe we have a new type of fence to deal with, one who's prepared to pay better prices. The crooks I know who might have pulled these recent jobs have all got money. They're spending it like it dropped from heaven. Where are they getting it from?"

Biggles shrugged. "Don't ask me. How can this new fence, assuming there is one, afford to pay more than the old hands?"

"I can see only one answer to that. He's got a safer and quicker way of unloading the stuff. I'm as certain as I sit here that it's going to the Continent, or some of it would have been traced by now. And if you ask me how, I'll tell you."

"How?"

"It's being flown out."

"Ah!" breathed Biggles. "Now I see what you're driving at. You think I might be able to help you to find this fly guy?"

"Could the stuff be flown out of the country?"

"Probably," admitted Biggles, frankly. "In fact, it has been done."

"By the regular services?"

"Not as far as I know. I can't imagine a crook, knowing that all ports are watched within minutes of a crime being discovered, trying to get through Customs with hot jewels in his pocket, even if he had a passport, which is unlikely."

"This new fence may not be known to the police."

"No matter. Any man or woman spotted going through Customs more often than the currency allowance permits soon comes under suspicion. If this man you have in mind is doing that it's only a question of time before they cop him."

"What about a private aeroplane?"

"That could be the answer," conceded Biggles. "Air smuggling goes on all the time in Europe, where it's only a few minutes' job to slip a load of contraband across a frontier. A privately-owned machine in the hands of a capable pilot can cock a snoot at official airports."

"And are you telling me there's no way of stopping that?"

"If there is, no one has yet thought of it. Just think for a minute. If, during the war, with thousands of men on the watch, equipped with radio, radar,

searchlights, guns and all the rest of it, machines could slip through on secret missions, dropping anything from spies to provisions, and even landing, without being caught, how much easier must it be now without such obstacles? In those days failure meant death, without any argument. Yet men, and women, were willing to take a chance. Today, the worst a sky sneak has to fear is a short prison sentence. We keep an eye open always for unofficial air traffic, but I can't watch the coast, east and west, day and night, from Land's End to John o' Groats. I've neither the staff nor the machines to do it, and if I had I wouldn't guarantee to stop such a racket, should one start."

"I've an idea one has already started," growled the Inspector.

"You're thinking in terms of a fence with an aircraft?"

"Or a fence with a pilot on his pay-roll."

"Assuming that is so, wouldn't it be easier for you to locate him on the ground, since he would of necessity be in contact with your pet jewel thieves? Watch them and they should lead you to him. I imagine you know them by sight, and where they spend their spare time."

"Of course. But the trouble about that is, they know me. The old lags know everyone in my Department by their Christian names. That's all part of their business. They can spot a cop as quick as a teenage girl can spot a film star. When I show my face in the Barnstable Arms, commonly known as the Barn, in Soho, where a lot of 'em hang out—and I often look in to see who's around—they gather round me like I was a rich uncle and argue as to who's going to buy me a drink."

Biggles smiled. "They must love you."

"Yes, as much as an old mouse loves the house-cat."

"What's the idea?"

"Oh, mebbe it's just to let me see they haven't forgotten me. Mebbe it's a front to cover up their nervousness, to let me see they're behaving themselves. More likely it's just bravado, swank, to kid themselves they're not afraid of me."

"But they are."

"You bet your life they are, particularly when they have something on their minds and they know I'm on the war path. Then it's a battle between their vanity and their fear of the law."

"Why do they congregate at that particular pub?"

"They've got to congregate somewhere to keep in touch, to get the latest news in their line of business. Birds of a feather... you know. The Barn is as good as anywhere, I suppose, and it's central. Anyway, they have to go out some time; they can't sit indoors all the while. Of course," concluded the Inspector meaningly, "as you don't normally come in contact with 'em they wouldn't know you."

"Neither would I know them," Biggles pointed out. "And I'm not pining to know 'em. These dirty birds are your pigeons, and as far as I'm concerned you can keep them."



“You’d soon get to know ‘em if you had a look at their mugs in our Rogues Gallery,” argued the Inspector. “We’ve photos of all of ‘em, ugly, plain and handsome.”

“Purely as a matter of interest tell me this,” requested Biggles. “How do crooks usually pass their stuff to a fence? I mean, do they go to his house, or shop, if he has one?”

“Only in exceptional circumstances. It’d be too dangerous. More likely contact would be made over the ‘phone in a harmless-sounding conversation. But a meet is made, a meet in crooks’ language being an appointment. Both parties arrive dead on time, to the tick. The stuff changes hands and the whole transaction is over in a couple of seconds. I’ve seen stuff passed by a man on the pavement to another in a car without the car stopping. Knowing they might be tailed, which means shadowed, by a police car, they waste no time in idle chatter.”

Biggles thought for a moment. “I get the drift of your idea,” he said, stubbing his cigarette. “But this is outside the range of my official duties.”

“It could be inside if aviation came into it,” contended the detective.

“Agreed. But how are we to find out if aviation does come into the picture?”

“That’s up to you. You’re the flyer.”

“Let’s get to the point,” returned Biggles. “I don’t want to appear uncooperative, particularly as on more than one occasion you’ve helped us. Without promising anything, what exactly do you suggest I do?”

“Well, what I was thinking was this. If you drifted into the Barn once in a while, and stood near the crooks who by that time you’d know by sight, you might hear an odd word dropped that would give you a line. There’s just a chance you might spot one of ‘em talking to a man you’ve known at some time or other in the aviation business.”

“I’d call that a pretty remote chance.”

“No harm would be done by having a look round.”

“I suppose not. All the same, I can’t imagine any crook being so daft as to talk in a public bar.”

“You’d be surprised. It’s amazing how rumours travel in the underworld. I don’t know how crooks get to know what they do know. Anyway, I’m certain these jobs are being pulled off by professionals. I know their methods. You’re bound to see some of ‘em in the Barn. All you have to do is keep your ears open.”

“Maybe I can think of something more likely than that to produce results,” said Biggles.

“I was hoping you would,” admitted Gaskin, frankly. “But you be careful what you get up to. If they get a sniff of why you’re there you might meet with an accident on the way home.”

“Does the landlord of this pub know he harbours crooks?”

“Probably. But as long as they behave themselves, and they usually do,

that's no concern of his. His business is to serve drinks to people who are sober and can pay for 'em. The customers aren't all crooks. It's a perfectly respectable house. Stands at the corner of Greek Street and Landal Square. Now how about casting an eye over some of the photographs I have downstairs?"

"Lead on," invited Biggles. "You'd better come too," he told the others, "in case you have to come looking for me."

They all followed Inspector Gaskin to the photographic department of the Criminal Record Office where are kept for reference the portraits of all criminals known to the police. Actually their work had taken them there before, but the records they had sought on those occasions were different.

The next hour was spent studying the faces, full-face view and profile, of jewel thieves, particularly those known to frequent the Barn and those who Gaskin suspected to have been concerned with the recent robberies. He gave the nicknames by which they were known in the underworld as well as their real names.

"Here's a smash and grab team," he said, producing the photographs. "A pretty bunch. They've all done time. Darkie Brown, Sid the Sailor and Bruiser Lee. Darkie Brown is the driver—and can he drive! Mind you, it's always a stolen car, so he doesn't care if he smashes it, or any other car for that matter. They're all experts in their way, up to every trick. And here's the bright boy who gets 'em the car. Toni the Needle. Italian by birth. Gets his name I believe from a nasty habit of carrying a stiletto." The Inspector turned to another page.

"This lout with the dead-pan expression is Dusty Brace," he went on. "He used to carry knuckledusters, and still may for all I know. A dangerous type. His department is picking pockets. Works the bus queues in the West End when the theatres close. I've popped him in several times. The trouble is they don't keep him locked up long enough. He'll never be anything but a thief. He must have been born one, for he once boasted to me he was pinching pennies out of his mother's purse almost as soon as he could walk. Nasty piece of work. Anyone catching him in the act, I mean a harmless civilian, is liable to get a bunch of steel knuckles in the face."

"I'll remember him," said Biggles. "Are any of these types known to carry guns?"

"A few. Not many. The old hands know where that leads to, but some of the youngsters who've spent too much time at the cinema think it's smart, the silly little fools. Here's one who used to carry a gun, Mike Sullivan. He's spent most of his life in prison. You'd think he'd get sick of it. Nice feller, you might suppose, glancing at him. But take a look at those eyes. A real bad 'un. He'll kill somebody one day. He's just finished five years for armed robbery and swears he'll never go back; which I take it to mean anyone trying to arrest him can expect trouble. He started as a codger for an old lag who died recently in gaol."

"What's his line now?" asked Biggles.

"Burglary. Cheap stuff, mostly. Robs his own class. He hob-nobs with Dusty Brace. You'll see 'em both at the Barn." The Inspector turned to another photograph.

"Now here's a very different type," he continued. "They call him Swell Noble so you can guess how he got his name. He was at Oxford, supposed to be studying law, when he first took a fancy to diamonds. Don't ask me why. He's a cat-burglar, and a fair masterpiece at it. He'd climb the face of a blank wall to get to a window. He once told me he'd climbed every college tower in Oxford, for fun. Said night-climbing over buildings was a regular sport there."

"So I believe, but that doesn't make students cat-burglars. Is Noble in prison now?"

"No, but I fancy he should be. I don't know anyone else who could have reached the window of that last Mayfair job. As you see, they come from all classes. Here's another who went to one of the expensive public schools. Augustus Norman. Gus for short. Good-looking chap. He and another feller named Stony Stoneways, who went to the same school, used to work together. The big blocks of luxury flats were their meat. Being smartly dressed and well-spoken they could get past the hall porter. They knew who occupied the flats and would wait until the selected victim went out. Up they'd go. Knock on the door. No answer. They'd let themselves in with a master key."

"Suppose somebody was at home?" queried Ginger.

"Easy. They'd called to test the telephone or make some such excuse. They'd say they were sorry— must have come to the wrong number. Gus's pal, Stony Stoneways, tackled a job on his own. We happened to be watching him and nailed him with the stuff on him. He's in Pentonville at the moment, with another two years to serve."

"I shall never understand why men of that sort take to crime," averred Biggles.

"Must have a crooked streak in their make-up. There was no need for Swell to go off the rails. His father was well off. When he died, broken-hearted, he left all his money to charity. That's all the good Swell did himself by trying to be a smart guy."

"I take it these crooks know each other?"

"More or less. They drift naturally into cliques, according to class and the sort of jobs they do. They get to know each other in gaol, no doubt, if not before. I've seen Swell and Stony and Gus, talking together in the Barn, comparing notes, although to see 'em you wouldn't guess what they were talking about. But crooks, like other people, have to talk to somebody, and they turn to those with whom they have something in common."

The Inspector went on to show them some portraits of receivers, past and present. Most of them were serving prison sentences. They were all ordinary-looking men who might have been met in any street. There was nothing to hint at their unlawful occupations, which, said Gaskin, made them subject to

severe penalties, for without them there would be no market for stolen goods, and therefore no purpose in that sort of crime.

“I think that’s about enough to go on with,” said

Biggles at last. “Let’s go. This place depresses me.”

“That may be, but these records ain’t kept for fun,” answered Gaskin. “The public must be protected and these are part of our defences. Let me know what you decide to do and how you get on.”

“I will,” promised Biggles, and led the way back to his own quarters.

“This is a new line for us,” remarked Algy, as he closed the door.

“Yes, and I don’t think much of it,” returned Biggles. “Maybe I was weak to allow Gaskin to talk me into what is really his job, but what else could I do? I suppose we should be flattered that he has asked us to lend a hand. Anyway, there is just a chance that aviation may come into it.”

“If you asked my opinion, old boy,” put in Bertie, “I’d say the whole disgusting business stinks.”

“Crime in any form stinks,” said Biggles, evenly, as he went back to his desk.

<sup>1</sup> Slang for cat burglars.

## CHAPTER II

### THE BAIT

IT was on the afternoon of the third day following the illuminating discussion on jewel thieves that Ginger walked into Biggles' office with a peculiar smile on his face.

"Has Inspector Gaskin been here?" he inquired.

"No," answered Biggles. "Why?"

"If I'm any good as a prophet you'll soon be hearing from him."

"About what?"

"There's been another jewel robbery."

"How do you know?"

"It's in the paper." Ginger held up an early edition of the *Evening News*.

"Was this job done in Portman Square, by any chance?" asked Biggles.

Ginger's eyebrows went up. "Yes! How did you know?"

"Somebody took a handbag from a car parked outside the house of Lady Fenton, maybe."

"Er—yes."

"The handbag contained some jewels, the most important of which was a magnificent emerald pendant. Right?"

Ginger tossed the paper aside. "I thought I was bringing you news. I see you know all about it."

"So I should."

"Why?"

Biggles smiled. "Because I organized it."

"You *what*?"

"You heard me."

"What's the big idea?"

"Use your head. For what purpose would I be likely to rig a job like that?"

"You didn't tell me you were going to do it."

"I didn't know myself until last night, after you'd gone home. Gaskin dropped in with his Press Relations Officer and he fixed it all up."

"Fixed! Do you mean the entire story is phoney?"

"Practically. As far as I know there is no Lady Fenton. There was no car. There was no handbag. There isn't even an emerald, but I have a very good imitation of one in a genuine gold setting—three dolphins pursuing each other, head to tail. The fish are appropriate."

"I take it this is some sort of bait?"

"Quite right."

"You're hoping to hook a crook?"

"I shall be satisfied if I can get one interested. Just standing around in the Barn waiting for something to happen seemed to me a pretty futile approach

so I decided to dangle a bait in the hope of speeding things up. Put it like this. I want to make contact with one or more of these crooks who meet at the Barn. It's hardly likely that one of them would speak to me, a stranger, without some inducement. I shall have to kick off, and, as I see it, the quickest way to get the ball rolling is to let it be known to the wide boys that I'm in the same line of business as themselves. Even then it may be some time before I get the information I'm really after—the name of a reliable fence. I can't ask outright. That would be too crude. I'm hoping that someone will tell me what I want to know. Maybe just drop a hint. Whatever I do will mean taking a chance so I decided last night to try this way first. If it doesn't work, well, Gaskin can't say I didn't try. I had to have a bait, and the bait had to be something valuable; valuable enough to interest the sort of receiver who, Gaskin believes, is buying the proceeds of these recent robberies. How could I explain how I came to be in possession of an important jewel unless one had been stolen?" Biggles smiled. "Well, now one has been stolen and the crooks will read about it. I have the swag, and they will soon know that, too."

"Where did you get the fake emerald?"

"I bought it from a pawnbroker—an unredeemed pledge. He'd had it for years, he said. Here it is— or part of it." Biggles opened a draw of his desk and took out a circular gold mount with a hollow centre, the cavity being formed by three fish.

"Where's the stone?" asked Ginger.

"I prised it out." Biggles produced from a waistcoat pocket what appeared to be a fine emerald.

"Why did you take the stone out?"

"Because although the mount is gold, the stone, as I have told you, is a fake—a very good fake, mind you. It might pass for the real thing with some people but of course it wouldn't fool an expert. The mount should be enough for my purpose—at all events, as the opening move. A description of the jewel has been issued, and it will be supposed, I hope, that if I have the mount I also have the stone. I would have preferred a genuine emerald, but obviously that was out of the question. A real stone of this size would cost thousands, and I might lose it. In fact, if things go well that's more than likely. The pawnbroker told me he thought the thing was probably a copy of an original jewel. Anyway, it'll have to do."

"And what exactly are you going to do with it?"

"Well, as I say, I didn't think much of Gaskin's scheme of just standing around in the Barn waiting for someone to let something slip out. That would be too chancey. We might have played that game for weeks to no purpose and I've something better to do. If, sooner or later, it meant offering a bait, I'd rather do it as a stranger, not as someone who has made a habit of drinking in the Barn. That's why I shall go straight ahead with my scheme."

"I see," returned Ginger, slowly. "You're reckoning on the crooks reading about the robbery."

"They can hardly fail to notice it."

"Very well. Then what?"

"Having a professional interest they should wonder who did the job, and how it was done. After listening for a whisper in the underworld without hearing anything they'll conclude that it was the work of an amateur, possibly someone who had been given the tip by an employee in the house. The staffs of big houses are constantly offered bribes for information about where the valuables are kept. Chauffeurs are offered large sums to leave car doors unlocked—when there's something valuable inside. Anyway, in this case I'm the amateur who did the job."

"Yes, but are the crooks to know that?"

"I shall take steps to let them know, in the hope that in due course the information will reach the ears of the man we are after—if he in fact exists. The receiver who pays good prices."

"You're going to the Barn?"

"Yes."

"Am I coming with you?"

Biggles grinned. "In view of what Gaskin said about codgers it might be a good idea if I had one."

"What about Algy and Bertie? Are they in on this?"

"They've already started on it from a different angle, which is to check up on all cross country flights, particularly night flights, made over the last couple of months by privately-owned light planes, whether the flight was made by the owner himself or a pilot employed by him. There should be no difficulty. It's a routine job, but it'll take time. I've been intending to do that for some time, anyway. I'm not so optimistic as to hope for a direct hook-up between aviation and the Barn, or any other rendezvous of the underworld; but we have to start somewhere. If this private-owner angle fails we'll have a look at the regular air services."

"To me, the snag about all this is, we haven't a particle of evidence that stolen goods are leaving the country, much less that air transport is being used."

"Gaskin's a wise bird or he wouldn't be where he is. If he has a hunch it's worth riding. I'd say it's rather more than a hunch. It's more a matter of elimination. Having been at the game for thirty years he knows all the usual tricks and methods for disposing of stolen property. He's explored them all without finding a clue and that has led him to the belief that he's up against something new. What *has* happened to all this stuff that has been pinched lately? Someone knows. The fact that Gaskin's narks have failed to pick up a word about it means that this new receiver, and there must be a receiver somewhere, has kept the lid tight on his own security. That in turn suggests he's no common thief. This chap has brains."

"If there is a chap," put in Ginger dubiously.

"There must be," declared Biggles. "One thing we can bank on is this:

these crooks who stole the stuff are not walking about with it in their pockets. They've sold it, which is why they're well supplied with money at the moment. Well, there it is. We'll have a look at the air angle. When I'm satisfied that flying doesn't come into it I shall tell Gaskin so and leave him to work things out for himself. Our job here begins and ends with aviation and I've no intention of being side-tracked into the ordinary work of the Yard, about which we know little. Gaskin would neither want nor expect that. We'll begin tonight by seeing in the flesh some of these crooked customers at the Barn. I shall, in fact, be one of them, having just come out of Pentonville."

"Why Pentonville?"

"That's where Stony Stoneways is doing time."

"What about it?"

"His public school pal, Gus Norman, is free, and may be at the Barn. We shall see. What I do there will depend on what happens, so all you can do is take your cue from me. I've arranged with Gaskin, should I find it necessary to get in touch with him without going to the Yard, that for the purpose of this operation my name will be Ted Walls. Don't forget that and call me Biggles, in case my name means anything to them. You can keep your own. It's as good as any."

"What time is zero hour?"

"About nine."

"Do we go as we are?"

"More or less. To look prosperous wouldn't fit with my act so we'll wear our oldest clothes, and shirts that aren't too clean. There's one thing we shall have to do before we go to the Barn."

"What's that?"

"Find ourselves lodgings. If we draw blank we can go home, but in case we do make a contact we ought to have somewhere to go when we leave the Barn. We might be followed."

"Followed? By whom?"

"I don't know. But we may arouse some curiosity, and it would hardly do to be seen going home to a rather expensive flat in Mount Street. That might arouse too much curiosity, particularly if it was learned that the occupants of the flat worked at Scotland Yard. These jewel thieves may not have heard of me, but they'll soon find out who I am if I'm seen going into the Yard. We'll take a couple of old suitcases with our small kit and book rooms at one of those cheap little hotels in Gillingham Street, near Victoria."

"Does Gaskin know about this set-up?"

"Of course. I told you he helped me to fix it."

"Who else?"

"Algy and Bertie. That's all. I asked Gaskin to keep it to himself. Let's go and have a cup of tea."

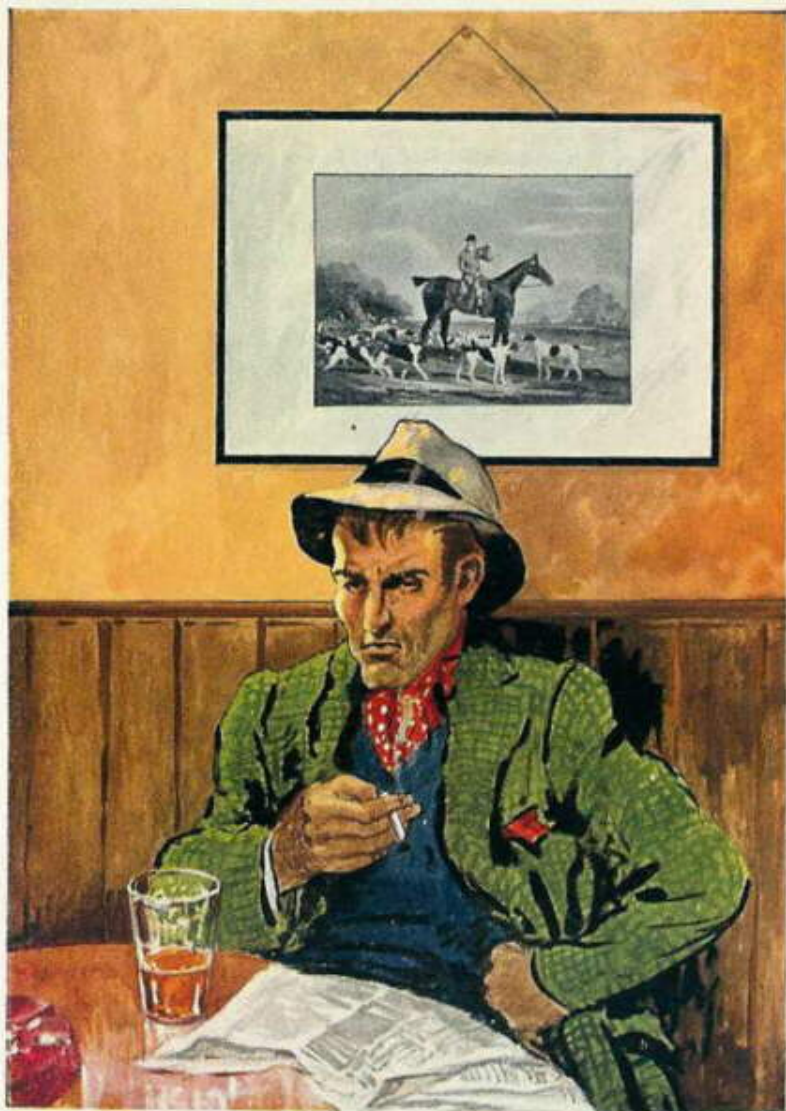
At eight-thirty that evening, Biggles and Ginger, looking somewhat shabby, left Mount Street in a taxi bound for Gillingham Street, where,



without difficulty they were able to book two single adjoining rooms in the Clepton, one of the cheapest of the several small hotels such as are always to be found near big railway stations. Then, leaving their suitcases, they walked to Victoria Street, from where a bus took them to within easy distance of their objective. They soon found it, for it was an establishment of some size, certainly a lot larger than Ginger expected. It was a modern type of building, having, as they learned, been rebuilt between the wars, and wore that appearance of prosperity that suggests efficient management.

Pushing open the swing doors of the saloon bar they were greeted by warm, smoke-laden air, a babble of voices and the clink of glass, for as Ginger observed, the place was well patronised. Having provided themselves with drinks at the long bar, where two or three women were serving under the eye of the landlord, they took them to a vacant seat, and from behind one of the customary small tables surveyed the scene.

Broadly speaking the customers were all unknown to Ginger, as was to be expected, for he was out of his usual element; but it was not long before he spotted Swell Noble, leaning against the bar talking to Gus Norman. Presently his roving eye picked out the gun-carrying Mike Sullivan, sitting by himself with a glass in front of him. Soon afterwards, however, Toni the Needle came in and joined him. Heads together they were quickly engrossed in earnest conversation.



Presently his roving eye picked out the gun-carrying  
Mike Sullivan. . .

*See page 32*

Ginger watched all this with a sort of morbid interest. He had encountered quite a number of criminals in his time, but not this sort, and it struck him as extraordinary that these men were apparently content to sit night after night in

such a place—when they were not in prison— talking and drinking. That, evidently, was their way of life, for there they were.

“You might try to hear what those fellows are talking about,” suggested Biggles, indicating with a glance Sullivan and the Italian.

Ginger drifted over casually and sat down near them; but they stopped talking at once, although they gave no indication that they had noticed him. After a little while, perceiving that he was serving no useful purpose, he got up and strolled away. But by the time he had rejoined Biggles the two men were talking again, Toni emphasising his points with eloquent gestures that revealed his Southern temperament.

“Nothing doing, eh,” murmured Biggles.

“Not a word. They shut up like oysters when I arrived within earshot.”

“That doesn’t surprise me. With Gaskin’s men always keeping a watchful eye on them they don’t talk in the hearing of people they don’t know. Now you see why I had to devise a scheme to put their minds at rest about us. Only if they think we’re crooks are they likely to talk in front of us.”

For some time they sat and watched while customers came and went, but they saw no one who, as far as they knew, was remotely concerned with aviation. From time to time Swell Noble’s eyes, always restless, went round the room, not so much as if he might be looking for any particular person but rather as a sort of check-up on who was there. Thus did he, thought Ginger, betray the nervous watchfulness behind his pose of easy nonchalance. Slim, of medium height, clean-shaven, with regular features and the figure of an athlete, immaculate in a dark suit, it was not easy to believe that he was what Gaskin had declared him to be; a cat-burglar, a man who had been to prison, a criminal with a record at Scotland Yard.

Gus Norman, to whom he was talking as he leaned against the bar, was a rather different type, although he still had about him that indefinable something, a sort of poise, a confidence in himself, that marks the man of higher education. He was in the early twenties, carelessly dressed in grey flannel trousers, a check sports jacket and suede shoes. He wore his fair hair rather long, and carried plenty of flesh without being actually fat. He could have been called good-looking in a rather effeminate way. From time to time when he caught sight of himself in the mirror on the opposite side of the bar he smoothed his hair in a manner that suggested a trace of conceit in his nature. Was vanity his real trouble? wondered Ginger.

Ginger was still pondering the problem of why such a man should choose deliberately a life of crime when Swell finished his drink and departed, leaving Norman alone.

“Okay,” said Biggles, softly, to Ginger. “I don’t want to spend all night here. Let’s see if we can start something. Don’t look surprised at anything say.”

He got up, and followed by Ginger joined Norman at the bar. “I believe you’re Gus Norman,” he said, evenly.

Norman's eyes switched round. "And if I were, what of it?" he returned, curtly, yet in a well-spoken tone of voice.

"You were described to me by a certain party known to both of us. He said I would probably find you here."

"Well?"

"You're a friend of Stony Stoneways."

"I don't know anyone of that name," replied Norman, coldly.

Biggles made a gesture of apology. "Sorry. If you don't know Stony you're not the man I'm looking for." He turned away.

Norman caught him by the sleeve. "Just a minute. What about this fellow Stony?"

"I saw him recently. I have a message."

"Where did you see him?"

"We happened to be in the same—er—hotel."

"What was the message?"

"It was for a man named Norman."

"I'm Norman."

"The message was to say you might be seeing him sooner than you expect."

Not a muscle of Norman's face moved. "I see," he laid, slowly. "Anything else?"

"That's all, except that he did mention it might be worth my while to make contact with you."

"For what reason?"

Biggles smiled wanly. "I gather he thought you might—er—put me wise."

"As—for instance?"

"You might know somebody who could do with this." Holding it in the palm of his hand Biggles gave Norman a glimpse of the gold mount.

Norman's face remained expressionless. "I wouldn't know what to do with that," he said, his eyes flashing round the room.

"Okay. It was just an idea."

"Where's the rest of it?"

"What do you mean?"

Norman's hard eyes met Biggles' squarely. "You know what I mean. Still, forget it. I'm not interested."

"Sorry," said Biggles. "I was only doing what Stony suggested." He went back to his seat.

"He didn't bite," breathed Ginger.

"You wouldn't know, with a man like that," replied Biggles. "He has to watch his foot every time he puts it down. The thing is, he knows, or he thinks he knows, who lifted Lady Fenton's emerald. He recognised the mount or he wouldn't have asked what I'd done with the rest of it. And if he knows, other people will soon know. That's all I want for the moment. I've planted a seed. All we can do now is wait to see if it bears fruit."

After a little while Norman finished his drink, and without so much as a glance at them, went out.

"I wonder where he's going," murmured Ginger.

"Home, probably," replied Biggles.

"We might as well go home ourselves," suggested Ginger.

"Don't be impatient," answered Biggles. "There's just a chance that my seed might start to sprout. You can't rush these things."

Half an hour passed. Nothing happened. It was now nearly closing time, and Biggles had just announced his intention of moving off when the swing doors opened and Norman came back. He went straight to the bar and ordered a drink.

"Now what?" said Ginger softly.

"Sit still."

Five minutes later Swell Noble came in. He joined Norman at the bar. Norman said something. Noble half glanced round.

"I think we've got a bite," said Biggles. "At all events, Norman has just pointed us out to Swell."

Then, to Ginger's surprise, Noble came over and sat near them.

"I hear you've been talking to a friend of mine," he said cheerfully.

"Who do you mean?"

"Stony Stoneways."

"Oh, you mean—"

"Ssh. Not so loud." Noble's eyes went round the room meaningly. "I've never seen you here before, Mr.—?"

"Walls. Ted Walls. I've never been here before," stated Biggles, truthfully.

"Did you come here simply to give that message to Gus Norman?"

"Not entirely."

"That's what I thought." A ghost of a smile crossed Noble's face. "Have you still got it?"

"Got what?"

"Don't quibble. It wastes time. The thing you showed Gus."

"Yes."

"Let's have a look at it."

Biggles passed the mount.

Swell looked at it and handed it back. "Where's the rest of it? The piece that matters."

"Where the rats can't get at it."

"You've still got it?"

"I have."

Swell looked horrified. "Do you mean you've got it on you?"

"Yes."

"Then take my tip and get rid of it as soon as you can." Swell started to get up. "I wouldn't walk about, in here of all places, with that thing in my pocket. You're dangerous company. Too dangerous for me." And with that, to

Ginger's surprise and disappointment, Swell rejoined Norman at the bar.

After a quick drink, and a few words spoken in an undertone, they went out together.

Biggles waited for a minute or two and then he, too, prepared to leave. "That'll do for tonight," he decided. "No use trying to do too much at once. Let's go."

They went out and walked to Shaftesbury Avenue, where, at a bus stop, Biggles lit a cigarette. "Don't look round but I think we're being followed," he said, softly.

Their bus came in. They boarded it, as did another man at the last moment, as the bus began to move. They went on top. He went inside.

"Is that the man?" asked Ginger.

"He came out of the pub by a different exit at the same time as we did, so if he isn't tailing us it must be a coincidence. If he gets off when we do it'll look less like a coincidence. If that happens pretend not to notice."

They left the bus at the top of the Vauxhall Bridge Road to walk the short distance to Gillingham Street. The man who had boarded it with them dropped off at the same stop, a few seconds after them, as the conductor rang his bell for the driver to proceed.

"I think that clinches it," said Biggles, as they walked on. "On no account look round. It seems as if someone is interested in us so our time in the tavern wasn't wasted."

"What's his idea?"

"Maybe just wants to see where we hang out. That suits me, because it suggests that we may have a visitor. After all, an emerald worth three thousand pounds would be a nice piece of fruit for anyone to pick up."

They turned into Gillingham Street, and presently, into the dingy hall of their hotel. From inside they saw the man who had left the bus with them walk past on the opposite side of the road.

They went up the threadbare-carpeted stairs to Biggles' room.

"So far so good," said Biggles, as he closed the door. "They know we have an emerald and they know where we live."

"What's the next move?"

"We'll leave that to them. There's one thing I must do, though, and that's drop a line to Algy to let him know where we are, in case he gets worried. We may be here for a day or two. I'd better let Gaskin know at the same time. For obvious reasons we daren't go near the Yard ourselves, now that we know someone is interested in our movements. I think we might as well turn in."

## CHAPTER III

### WHEELS WITHIN WHEELS

THE following morning, shortly after Ginger had returned from posting the letters to Algy and Inspector Gaskin and was having a cup of tea with Biggles in his room, the voice of the woman who ran the hotel was heard shouting up the stairs: "Mr. Walls! You're wanted on the 'phone."

Biggles turned startled eyes to Ginger's face. "By gosh! Somebody's smartly off the mark. Who on earth can it be? Nobody, officially, knows we're here."

"It must be either Noble or Norman," declared Ginger.

"I didn't give them my address! But it can only be to do with what happened last night."

They went down to the tiny hall where the telephone shared a small table with a dusty aspidistra. Biggles picked up the instrument. "Hello, yes, who's that?" he called.

"Is that you, Walls?" came the reply.

"Yes. Walls here," confirmed Biggles, his expression changing as he recognized the voice. To Ginger he said in a quick astonished tone, "It's Gaskin." He went on, into the 'phone, "How did you know I was here?"

"Never mind that. Can you be overheard?" inquired the detective, cautiously.

"No. We're alone," Biggles told him.

"All right. I thought I'd better let you know you started something last night. The word has gone round that you pulled the Portman Square job. It has even reached me." Gaskin chuckled. "I had to pay for that information, too, to make the thing look natural. I told you how fast that sort of news travels through the class of people you're dealing with. You're being tailed, so be careful where you go and what you do. Thought I'd better tip you off."

"Thanks," acknowledged Biggles. "I've just sent you a note to tell you where we were."

"You needn't have bothered. Do you think I'd let you barge into that dump without keeping an eye on you?"

"I saw someone behind us as we came home."

"You didn't see my man. He was behind the man who was tailing you. The feller you saw was Greeky Stavros. You needn't worry about him. He's just a cheap spiv who does odd jobs like that for the bigger boys. He wouldn't be interested himself so somebody must have put him on to you. Watch how you go. With that thing in your pocket—they know you've got it—you might run into a cosh, so keep out of dark corners. That's all. Anything you want to say?"

"I'd better not talk from here," said Biggles. "I gather you know what

happened last night.”

“I’ve a pretty good idea. Looks as though your scheme clicked. Let me know if I can help.”

“I will. Thanks a lot. Good-bye.” Biggles hung up.

“That was decent of him,” averred Ginger, who had managed to hear the conversation by putting an ear by the instrument.

Biggles looked at him with a curious expression on his face. “It seems we’re already in deeper water than we knew. The fact is, I suppose, being new to this particular stretch of dirty water we were almost certain to get out of our depth. There’s more to it than I thought. It shook me for a moment that our friend should so soon know where we were; but that, to him I imagine, would be just simple routine. We’re learning a thing or two about Gaskin’s regular line of country. I wonder who went to the trouble of having us shadowed.”

“It must have been either Noble or Norman.”

“As you say. But I can’t think why they should bother. They didn’t strike me as that sort.”

They returned to Biggles’ room to finish their morning tea, but hardly had they done so than they heard the ‘phone ring again, and the manageress shout: “Mr. Walls! ‘Phone.”

Biggles sprang up. “Stiffen the crows! What now? Good thing we didn’t reckon on a quiet morning.”

They returned to the telephone, Biggles holding the receiver so that they could both hear the conversation. “Walls here,” he announced. “Who’s that?”

The man at the other end ignored the question and he wasted no time in preamble. “You were trying to sell something last night,” he stated crisply.

“Quite right.”

“Still got it?”

“Yes.”

“Still want to get rid of it?”

“I’d feel more comfortable without it.”

“I’d believe that,” sneered the voice. “I’ll give you two quid for it.”

“It’s worth ten, by weight.”

“Two.”

“Make it four.”

“Split the difference and say three. That’s the top.”

“Okay,” agreed Biggles. “You coming here for it?”

“Not on your life.”

“All right. Where’s the meet?” inquired Biggles, dropping into underworld slang.

“Five to eleven. On the dot. Under the big platform clock at Victoria.”

“I’ll be there.”

“Carry *Picture Post* in your left hand showing the word *Post*.”

“Right.”

“And wrap the thing in a bit of newspaper.”



"I get it."

"One last thing. I take it you've still got the missing bit—the thing that was in the middle?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Be seeing you." The speaker hung up with a bang.

Biggles turned to Ginger. "As I said just now, we're learning. Things are moving faster, a lot faster, than I anticipated. We shall have to watch it or we'll be run off our feet. I'm not sure that hasn't already happened."

They went back to Biggles' room.

"Are you going to part with that piece of gold?" inquired Ginger, after he had closed the door.

"I didn't really want to but it seems as if I shall have to," answered Biggles. "It'd look queer now if I refused."

"What do you make of all this?"

Biggles thought for a moment. "First, we're dealing with a man who doesn't know us by sight, because if he did this *Picture Post* set-up wouldn't be necessary. That rules out Noble and Norman. He may be a small-time man who's heard a whisper of what I've got. I mean the mount, not what he called the missing bit. Still, that he mentioned the missing bit at all suggests that he has an interest in it. I'll tell you another thing. The fact that he let me spring him a pound for the mount means he was anxious to buy."

"Why the mount and not the emerald?"

"I'd say the answer to that is somebody wants to check up that this really is Lady Fenton's pendant before opening negotiations for the stone. That three-dolphin design is unusual, and would be sufficient proof. When the check has been made someone will be after the stone. That's how it looks to me."

"By back-tracking that call we might find out who it was who rang up."

"Not a hope. It's a thousand to one it came from a public call box."

"And you're to meet him at five to eleven. Why five to eleven? Why not make it dead on the hour."

Biggles shrugged. "I wouldn't know. There may have been a reason for the odd minutes but I wouldn't waste time trying to guess it."

"How on earth could he have known your name?"

"The fact that he does tells us something else. Norman or Noble come into this. I told Swell my name in the Barn, but I told no one else. Unless he spread it around, this morning's development must therefore have started with him."

"He didn't strike me as a type who would waste time quibbling over a pound or two."

"Nor me. It looks as if he might be after the emerald, either on his own account or acting for someone else. Either way he must know where he can dispose of the stone. He knows a receiver, although it doesn't necessarily follow that it's the one Gaskin is after. But it could be."

"It wasn't Norman on the 'phone?"

"No. Definitely. It was an educated voice but it wasn't his."

Ginger agreed.

"This is getting quite an amusing little puzzle," remarked Biggles, lighting a cigarette.

"I don't know about amusing," returned Ginger dubiously. "I have a feeling we're getting on thin ice."

Biggles smiled. "The thinner the better. Thin ice means we're getting somewhere."

"How about me tailing this chap when you've handed him the mount?"

"Not a chance. He'll anticipate that possibility and see it can't happen. These crooks live on the jump, as a result of knowing they may be watched. Why do you suppose this meet was made for the middle of a big railway station? Not only will the station be crowded but there are a dozen ways out of it. This fellow may have a car handy, anyway."

"I could get a car."

"For it to be any use, the traffic being what it is you'd have to know where he'd parked his. Still, there's no reason why you shouldn't watch which way he goes, as far as you can. It wouldn't do for me to try to follow in case I myself am shadowed."

"Fair enough," agreed Ginger. "I'll do my best."

"Don't speak to me afterwards. Make your way back to the hotel. I'll meet you here. But time's getting on so we'd better get mobile," said Biggles, wrapping the gold mount in a scrap of newspaper. "Give me a twenty minutes' start to get well clear before you come out. You'll see me standing under the clock at five to eleven sharp. Don't come too close."

Biggles arrived at the station, which was only just round the corner, with five minutes to spare, to give himself time to buy the periodical that was to identify him. With it folded as arranged, and the newspaper-wrapped mount in his right hand, he stood by the bookstall until the appointed time and then moved to below the clock.

Although he was prepared for what was to happen he was a trifle taken aback when a slight, dark, smartly-dressed man of about thirty, with a close-clipped strip of moustache on his upper lip, who had been striding along as if on his way to catch a train, stopped abruptly and said in a brittle voice: "Okay. Let's have it."

The mount changed hands, as did three tightly folded one-pound notes.

"You staying on at the Clefton?" asked the man tersely.

"For a day or two, anyway," answered Biggles.

"Right." The man strode on, leaving Biggles slightly bewildered by the speed at which the transaction had been completed. He lost sight of the man instantly in the milling travellers, and realized that he had caught only a fleeting glimpse of his face. But one vivid impression remained. It was the tie the man was wearing.

Biggles put the notes in his pocket, took a cigarette from his case, lit it and strolled over to the refreshment room where he had a cup of coffee. From first

to last he had not seen Ginger. Finishing his coffee he went out and, deep in thought, made his way back to the hotel.

Ginger arrived half an hour later, having, as he said, as a matter of precaution, returned home by the side streets.

“Well, how did you get on?” inquired Biggles.

“How right you were,” answered Ginger. “I hadn’t a hope. I saw the stuff switched, of course, but it was all so quick that I was nearly caught on one foot. The chap walked round the booking office and then left the station by the Continental platform. You know that narrow street. It was choc-a-bloc with cars. For a moment I lost sight of him. Then I spotted him getting in a car and away he went. There wasn’t a taxi handy so that was that.”

“What was the car?”

“A black Mercedes.”

“Get the number?”

“KBX 919. But wait a minute. That wasn’t the end. Talk about learning! I’m learning fast. While I stood there, feeling a bit of a fool, a chap came off the platform and started creating, saying his car had gone. A policeman came over to see what the fuss was about.

The chap pointed to the gap where the Mercedes had been parked and said he had left it there while he went to see his wife off on the boat train.”

Biggles struck himself. “Of *course!*” he exclaimed. “I must be getting dense.”

“Of course what?”

“The time! Five to eleven. The boat train leaves at eleven. People leave their cars while they see friends off and they don’t come back until the train’s gone. The lad who met me must have marked the car he was going to take and so was all ready for a quick getaway. You did well. This may tell us something.”

“How?”

“Obviously, the fellow who had had his car pinched would give the number to the policeman. The Yard would have that information in a matter of minutes. Another few minutes and every police car on the road would have the number by radio and be on the lookout for it. Of course, the chap who pinched the car would know all about that, so we can assume he hadn’t far to go. As soon as he’d finished with it he’d drop it like a hot brick. That car should have been found by now. Let’s find out where it was picked up. I won’t ring Gaskin from here. Let’s go out to a call box. Someone may be listening and the Yard’s number is too well known.”

They went out to the nearest public telephone. Biggles dialled the Yard, and having got it asked for Gaskin’s extension.

“Walls speaking,” he said, when the Inspector answered. “At ten fifty-five a car numbered KBX 919 was removed without the owner’s consent from Victoria Station, continental side. Has it been found?”

“Just a minute. I’ll find out.”

After a short wait the Inspector came back. "Yes," he answered. "It was picked up at eleven twenty-five."

"Where?"

"Against the curb at the west end of Piccadilly, on the Park side, about a hundred yards short of Hyde Park Corner."

"Thanks. That's all I wanted to know," acknowledged Biggles, and hung up.

He turned to Ginger. "That's even better than I hoped for. It may be that even crooks can slip over little things. You know I don't trust coincidence, but there are times when it has to be considered. You heard where that car was found?"

"Yes."

"Do you remember the buildings on the other side of the road?"

"The R.A.F. Club and the Royal Aero Club take up quite a bit of ground. They're the only two I can recall. One can usually find room to park a car there."

"I wasn't thinking so much of parking space as the buildings."

"The Clubs?"

"Yes."

"What's remarkable about that?"

"If the car incident had to be considered alone I'd say nothing. But when I tell you that the man who met me under the clock was wearing an R.A.F. tie you'll get the drift of the lines on which I'm thinking."

Ginger's eyes opened wide. "He might have gone to one of the clubs to meet someone."

"It'd be reasonable to suppose he'd park the car somewhere near his destination, if only to save walking."

"Why not try the clubs to see if he's there?"

"Not likely. He might see me, in which case he'd certainly wonder how a shady character like Ted Walls came to be a member of the club."

"But you think we may have struck an aviation trail?"

"It seems possible. But don't forget that such a trail can cut two ways. If, as Gaskin suspects, aviation comes into this jewel racket, we've only got to probe deep enough for someone to recognize me. I do my best to avoid publicity, but a lot of people in aviation know me and what I'm doing. It so happened that the fellow I met this morning didn't know me any more than I knew him; but if he *had* recognized me we should have needed some nerve to go back to the Barn."

"If, as you believe, that gold mount is on its way for inspection, the man who wants the emerald may be in the club now. The chap who bought the mount may have gone there to meet him."

"It could be. But let's not jump to conclusions. This needs thinking about. For the moment let's go and have some lunch."

## CHAPTER IV

### GIVE AND TAKE

IF, as he averred, Biggles was surprised by the speed at which one incident had followed another, he was soon to learn that these had not come to an end. More were to follow before the day was out.

At nine o'clock he went with Ginger to the Barn, more for something to do, and perhaps with a feeling of curiosity, than for any definite reason. He was expecting to be approached about the emerald but he did not think that would happen at the Barn. More likely a call on the telephone would arrange a 'meet', and it was for that he was hoping.

Hardly had they found seats when Gus Norman, who had been standing at the bar, came over to them with a directness which suggested that he had been waiting for their arrival.

"I was hoping you'd turn up," he began, taking a seat next to Biggles.

"Well, here I am," returned Biggles. "Go ahead."

"Have you still got that stone?"

Biggles hesitated.

"Come clean, we know you've got it," said Norman, impatiently.

"Yes. What about it?" replied Biggles.

"If you'll let me have it I'll get you the top price for it."

"Do you mean you want me to part with it without the cash?"

"Yes."

"Nothing doing. What do you take me for?"

"All right. I'll give you two hundred for it, spot cash."

"It's insured for three thousand."

"That's probably over its value. I'm not concerned with insurance."

"You haven't even seen it," argued Biggles. "It may not be the real thing."

"I'll take a chance on that."

Ginger realized that Biggles was being forced into a tight corner. Knowing the stone was a fake he was loath to part with it for fear of repercussions that would reveal him to be as false as the stone. It had never been his intention to sell it. It was to be the lure to take him to the receiver Gaskin was looking for. Norman was a jewel thief, not a receiver.

The conversation continued.

"How much are you going to get for it?" inquired Biggles.

"That's my business."

"It's mine, too. I'm not giving anything away."

"What do you think *you* can do with it?" demanded Norman sarcastically.

"If you had a market you wouldn't be walking about with that hot stone in your pocket. Don't be a fool, Walls. Can't you see I'm doing you a good turn to take it off you? If it's found on you it'll be up the steps for you.<sup>1</sup>"

“That goes for you, too,” retorted Biggles.

“It won’t be long in my pocket,” declared Norman. “I’m offering you a fair price.”

“And if I don’t take it?”

“You may end up by getting nothing,” asserted Norman, significantly. “A lot of people know you’ve got it.”

“You’re not buying this stone for yourself,” stated Biggles.

“I didn’t say I was.”

“Take me to the man you’re buying it for and I’ll give you a quarter of whatever he pays me.”

There Biggles nearly went too far. Suspicion flashed for a moment in Norman’s eyes. “Nothing doing,” he answered shortly.

Biggles hastened to get on safer ground. “I’ll take five hundred, cash down.”

“I haven’t got that much money on me, but I’ll tell you what I’ll do. You give me the stone. I’ll give you two hundred now, in one pound notes, and another two hundred when I come back. Make up your mind. There may be a bogey<sup>2</sup> watching us.”

“Okay. I’ll take it,” agreed Biggles.

Norman slipped him a wad of notes held together by an elastic band. Biggles handed over the green stone. Norman slipped it in a waistcoat pocket without even looking at it, and without another word walked away. Ginger watched him pass through the swing doors into the street.

“Had I known this was going to happen I’d have arranged for one of Gaskin’s expert tailors to follow him,” muttered Biggles, irritably.

“You didn’t want to part with the stone,” said Ginger.

“Of course not. But what else could I do? I’m afraid I’ve made a bad move.”

“Somebody will soon spot that rock’s a dud.”

“Of course.”

“What are you going to say when Norman throws it back at you?”

“Plead ignorance. I’ll tell him I don’t pretend to be a jewel expert.”

“You’re going to wait for Norman to come back?”

“I don’t think so. We don’t want a scene here. I feel more like going home. Norman will know where to find us. Let’s go.”

As they got up and walked towards the door the man who Gaskin, looking at his photographs, had named Dusty Brace, did the same thing. Reaching the doors together they came into collision.

“Sorry,” said Biggles.

“That’s all right, mate,” said Dusty, and stood aside for them to go first. Which they did. The incident was so trivial that Ginger did not even remark on it as he walked on to the bus stop in Shaftesbury Avenue.

On this occasion, as far as they were aware, they were not followed. In view of what had happened the previous night they watched for the

possibility.

They had been talking in Biggles' room for perhaps half an hour when there came a sharp knock on the door.

"Here we go," breathed Biggles. "Come in," he called.

Into the room came Norman and a man they did not know—a tough-looking type. "What's the idea?" demanded Norman, flinging the imitation emerald on the table.

Biggles feigned astonishment. "What's wrong?"

"You can keep that bit of green glass."

"Do—do you mean it's phoney?" stammered Biggles.

Norman stared hard at Biggles' face. "Do you mean you didn't know?"

"I'm no expert."

"I'll take your word for it. But that thing's no use to me. Give me back my two hundred pounds."

"Certainly," agreed Biggles, readily, for knowing this probably would happen he was prepared to return the money. Indeed, it would, he realized, cause trouble if he refused. "You don't think I'd try to hang on to the dough if the thing was phoney, do you?"

"I wouldn't know," returned Norman coldly. "Hand over."

Biggles stood up and put a hand in the trouser pocket in which he had put the wad of notes. His expression changed abruptly. He frowned. Swiftly he went through his other pockets; and when, at the end, he stared at Norman it was clear at least to Ginger that his consternation was genuine.

"It's gone," said Biggles, in a voice that sounded slightly dazed.

"What's gone?" asked Norman, shortly.

"The money you gave me."

"Don't try that with me," rasped Norman, and his companion moved forward threateningly.

Biggles' eyes narrowed. "Just a minute—don't get excited," he said grimly. "I know where that money went."

"You'd better remember," prompted Norman, frostily.

"That whizzer<sup>3</sup> Brace has got it."

"How did he get it?"

"How do you think? He bumped into me as I was leaving the Barn. I should have guessed that wasn't an accident. He's got it."

"Are you on the level?"

"Of course I'm on the level. I wouldn't hold out on you over a thing like this."

"What are you going to do about it?"

"I'll show you what I'm going to do about it," rapped out Biggles. "I'm not letting that cheap hook get away with that."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going back to the Barn and make him cough up." Biggles was really angry.

"I'll come with you," said Norman. "Let's go."

They all trooped down the stairs and into the street. They had taken only a few paces when Ginger clapped a hand to a pocket and said, "I've come without my cigarettes. I'll catch you up." He ran back.

The rest walked on, and after waiting for a minute or two at the corner of Vauxhall Bridge Road Biggles managed to stop a taxi, which he held until Ginger rejoined them. "Come on," he snapped impatiently, when Ginger ran up. "You're wasting time."

They all got in the cab. Biggles paid the driver outside the Barn. They all went in. Brace was still there, sitting at a corner table talking to Toni the Needle. Biggles strode straight up to him and held out a hand. "Give it back," he said softly but succinctly.

"Give what?" inquired Brace coldly. "What are you talking about."

"Don't give me that line," rasped Biggles. "Cough it up."

"Cough nothing."

Biggles took a pace nearer. "Listen, Dusty. That money wasn't mine. You're going to hand it back, or else...."

"Else what?" sneered the pickpocket.

At this juncture the landlord, who must have seen from the bar that trouble was brewing, bustled up. "We don't want none of that here," he said sharply. "What's the trouble?"

Biggles indicated Brace with a jerk of his thumb. "This cheap skate has lifted out of my pocket a wad that doesn't belong to me."

"Give it up, Dusty," ordered the landlord. "I've told you before I won't stand for that in here."

"He's lying," said Brace.

"You saw me give him the money," accused Norman.

How the matter would have ended had there been no interruption is a matter for surmise, but at this stage of the proceedings a sudden break in the babble caused all eyes to seek the cause.

Inspector Gaskin had walked in.

After his eyes had made a comprehensive survey of the room he strolled over to the little group of which Biggles was the centre. "What's going on?" he inquired, casually.

"Nothing much," answered Biggles. "Just a little argument."

"What are you doing in here, anyway? This isn't your usual lay-by."

"Just having a drink, that's all. Nothing wrong with that, is there? Why pick on me?"

"Because you looked as if you had something to say," answered the Inspector, nonchalantly. "What was it?"

Biggles looked at Brace. "Will you tell him or shall I?"

Brace glared. "You squealer," he spat.

The landlord, apparently concerned more with peace than truth, stepped in. "It was like this," he explained. "This gentleman dropped some money. This



other gentleman picked it up and is arguing about giving it back.”

“We should be able to settle that without any fuss,” said the Inspector, smoothly. He extended a hand to Brace. “Come on, hand it over.”

“But—”

“Don’t argue with me. Where is it?”

Pale with anger or mortification Brace tossed the wad of notes on the table.

“I was only foolin’,” he growled.

The Inspector picked up the wad. “Very nice,” he said. “I can understand you wanting to hang on to it, Dusty.” He turned to Biggles. “You seem to have been busy, Walls.”

“No,” protested Biggles, sullenly.

“Where did you get it?”

“I backed a horse, and it won.”

Gaskin smiled sadly. “You always were a good liar, Walls, but I suppose I shall have to take your word for it.” He handed Biggles the wad. “I wouldn’t walk about with that in your pocket, if I were you. Not when Dusty’s around, anyway,” he added, slyly. “Well, I’ll get along.”

“Have a drink, Inspector?” invited the landlord.

“No thanks. Goodnight all.” The Inspector nodded and strolled out with the same assurance as he had entered, whereupon the babble was at once resumed.

Biggles handed the wad to Norman. “You’d better take care of this while I still have it,” he said, cynically.

Norman took the money, and leaving Brace glowering they walked over to the bar. As they reached it a man, a young man, looking somewhat excited, came in hurriedly. Walking quickly to Norman he took him to one side and whispered in his ear.

Norman started. He nodded. A smile spread slowly over his face. He returned to Biggles. “You were right about Stony,” he said softly.

“You mean?”

“He’s out. Over the wall. So long.” Norman, with the informant who had brought the news, hurried out.

For a second Biggles stood still. Then he turned to Ginger with a grimace. “You heard that?”

“Yes. Stony has broken gaol.”

“That’s a smack in the eye I didn’t expect,” muttered Biggles. “You realize what it means.”

“Of course. Norman will tell Stony he got his message. Stony will deny sending a message and the cat will be out of the bag. Norman will wonder what your game was.”

“And he’ll probably arrive at the right answer.”

“What will he do?”

“He may tackle me about it, in which case it’ll take a bit of explaining. More likely he’ll say nothing. I see two rays of light. One is that the police

grab Stony before he can compare notes with his pal Norman. That's a poor hope because unless I'm mistaken, Norman, knowing where Stony will go into hiding, is already on his way to see him. The other thing that may save us from being marked down as police spies was Gaskin's attitude towards me when he looked in here. He treated me as if he knew me as a crook. That was a bit of luck."

"That wasn't altogether luck," answered Ginger.

"What do you mean?"

"I asked him to come to the Barn."

"You what?"

"When I went back to fetch my cigarettes, as I said, I 'phoned him that as there was likely to be a flare-up between you and Brace it might be a good thing if he looked in. His timely arrival wasn't just a coincidence."

"So that was why you went back. I knew you must be up to something but I didn't guess what. Great work. I realized it was asking for trouble to tackle that dirty pickpocket but what else could I do? I had to try to put myself right with Norman. He was bound to discover the stone was a fake and demand his money back. I was prepared for that, and had every intention of returning the notes as the only way of lulling his suspicions that I'd deliberately pulled a fast one on him. It shook me when I put my hand in my pocket and found the money had gone."

Ginger grinned. "I'll bet it did."

"As it happens I needn't have bothered," went on Biggles. "If Norman meets Stony our game here will die a sudden death. One way and another I seem to be making a mess of things. You talked a little while ago of being on thin ice. Be prepared for it to break at any moment."

"Things were going all right till Brace picked your pocket. And it's sheer bad luck that Stony should choose today to make a break."

Biggles shook his head. "Things were beginning to slip. That dud stone started it. I was always afraid of that. I may have made a mistake in parting with it. Still, it served its purpose. It has given us at least one important clue."

"What's that?"

"The fence Gaskin is looking for is in or near London—or comes to London. At all events, Norman took that stone to a receiver. It was he who spotted it was a dud. If Norman was able to take it to him between the time I gave it to him and the time he threw it back at me it can only mean he hadn't far to go. The fact that Norman had two hundred pounds in his pocket, ready to pay for the stone, suggests to me that he was sent to the Barn with that object in view. Anyway, we have plenty to think about. There's nothing more we can do here for the time being so we might as well go home."

They continued to discuss the situation after they had returned to the hotel, having had a quick meal at a snack bar on the way.

"What's the next move?" asked Ginger.

"I haven't made up my mind yet about that," answered Biggles. "It will

probably depend on whether or not the police recapture Stony, and Norman's reactions when he finds out—if he does—that my tale about him was false. The next move may come from the other side. We're really at a loose end, now that I've lost my bait and the emerald is known to be a fake. I think I can see how that came about. Word reached someone, say an unknown receiver who we will call Mr. X, that I had the emerald. Norman or Noble must have been responsible for that because only they knew about it. Mr. X decided to confirm the information by sending the chap in the R.A.F. tie to buy the mount. That would identify the jewel because a description had been circulated by the police. After that one of two things happened. Mr. X sent Norman to buy the jewel or Norman decided to buy it on his own account with the intention of selling it at a profit."

"Which do you think is the most likely?"

"If it was Mr. X, why did he send Norman to buy the stone? Why didn't he send the chap with the R.A.F. tie who met me at Victoria? On the other hand, if Norman was working for himself from where did he get the two hundred pounds?"

"He could have had that as a result of a recent robbery."

"Agreed. Actually, the point isn't important because either way there must be a fence in the background. A thing that puzzles me is where Swell Noble fits into this jigsaw. He comes into it. He certainly had an interest in the emerald. All we know is, he's a crony of Norman's."

"Maybe it was just professional interest that caused him to speak to you?"

"It could have been that. But he, too, might have been working on his own account. Anyhow, the first step in the morning will be to contact Gaskin and find out if there's any news of Stony. In the evening we'll drift into the Barn and let things take their course. If Norman's there we shall soon know from his manner which way the wind blows. Until we know that there isn't much point in making a definite plan. Now let's get some sleep."

1 Up the steps: crook parlance for the Central Criminal Court, Old Bailey.

2 Police officer.

3 Whizzer: crook slang for 'pickpocket'.

## CHAPTER V

### A DAY IN THE COUNTRY

SHORTLY after nine the next morning Biggles set out for the public telephone boxes at Victoria station to put through a call to Inspector Gaskin. The first editions of the evening papers were already being delivered and Ginger paused to buy one from the boy at the entrance. Idly turning it sideways to glance at the "stop press" column he came to a skidding stop.

"They've got him," he told Biggles, tersely. "Listen to this." He read the brief notice. "Gerald Stoneways, the convict who escaped yesterday from Pentonville, was recaptured late last night."

"Good. That was pretty quick work," commented Biggles.

"You won't have to 'phone Gaskin now," said Ginger.

"It's even more important that I should," asserted Biggles. "We must find out what time this happened... was it before Norman could make contact with him, or afterwards. I'm pretty sure from the speed at which Norman left the Barn that he was on his way to meet him. He knew where he'd make for. I'll speak to Gaskin and get the gen. Stand close and you'll be able to hear what he says—save me repeating it."

He put through the call, and when he was connected, opened the conversation with: "I see you've got Stoneways. Where and at what time did it happen?"



“Where and at what time did it happen?”

“Listen, and I’ll tell you about it,” answered the Inspector. “It’s quite a story.”

“Go ahead, but first tell me this. When you came to the Barn last night did you know Stoneways had escaped?”

“Of course. And this is what happened. I had a man in the Barn last night, a

new lad not known to our friends there. Knowing Norman was a pal of Stoneways, as I left the Barn I gave my lad the wink to tail Norman thinking he might show us where Stony was hiding. Now then, get hold of this. Norman made a 'phone call. He then went by taxi to King's Cross, suburban side, where he took up a position in a dark corner like he was waiting for someone. He was there close on an hour. We know now he must have been waiting for Stony."

"How do you know that?"

"Because we picked up Stony at the same place. And funnily enough that had nothing to do with my man tailing Norman. Stony, no doubt being in a hurry and not wanting to be seen on the street, was fool enough to pinch a car, although at that time we didn't know who'd done that particular job. Stony was out of luck. The owner of the car saw him go off with it. He 'phoned the number to the Yard, with the result that inside five minutes every officer in the Metropolitan area was on the look-out for it. A Flying Squad car spotted it heading up the Euston Road, followed it, and jumped on the driver when he stepped out at King's Cross. Who did the officers find in their hands but the very feller half London was looking for—Stony."

"Did Norman see this happen?"

"Couldn't help but see. But don't be in a hurry. I haven't finished yet. Norman, still tailed by my lad, takes a ticket for Hertford North, which makes it look as if Stony might have been on his way there, too. My lad followed on to Hertford, just over an hour's run. When Norman arrived, there was a car waiting for him, and from the way he made a bee-line for it he must have known it would be there. The engine of the car was running. Norman hops in and away they go, leaving my lad standing on the pavement. There was nothing he could do. There wasn't another car in sight."

"Did he get the number of Norman's car?"

"No. There wasn't a chance. It was away in a flash. It was a big black car—a Daimler, my lad thinks. He waited till the last train without seeing anything more of Norman and then came home to report."

"Then it looks as if Norman spent the night in or near Hertford."

"He must have done if the car didn't take him back to London. There's no doubt he reckoned to meet Stony at King's Cross. Remember, he made a 'phone call."

"That might have been to Hertford, to arrange for the car to meet him."

"Could be. I didn't think of that."

"Has Norman returned yet from Hertford?"

"Not by train. I'm having an eye kept on the station."

"But you don't want Norman for anything, do you?"

"No. But I might. I try to keep tabs on his sort in case anything happens."

"Okay," said Biggles. "I shall run down to Hertford to watch that end."

"But we shall see him at King's Cross when he comes back," Gaskin pointed out.

"I'm not thinking so much of him as the car that picked him up. As it met him at the station it'll probably take him back there when he decides to return to London. I'd like to know more about it. I shall need a car myself but I don't want to come near the Yard. Can you lend me one of yours? Not an official car; one of the plain standard types."

"A Ford do you?"

"Do fine."

"Where will you collect it?"

"Have it as soon as you can outside the Grosvenor Hotel. I'm speaking from Victoria so that's as handy as anywhere. Tell the driver to open the door and stand by it so that I'll know it when it comes."

"I'll do that," promised Gaskin. "Is that the lot?"

"That's all. Good-bye."

Biggles hung up and turned to Ginger with a whimsical smile. "I expected a dull morning, instead of which things seem to be buzzing. This trip of Norman's to the country opens up new possibilities. It seems that he couldn't have made contact with Stony after all, unless he spoke to him on the 'phone; and even then I imagine he'd be in too big a hurry to talk about me. That's a load off my mind. Let's walk round to the Grosvenor."

The car arrived after a wait of five minutes. The driver made a sign and walked away. Biggles took the wheel, and with Ginger beside him headed north for the county town of Hertfordshire. As they sped up the Great North Road Biggles remarked: "This trip may produce nothing, but it may lead to surprises. It depends on what Norman does. If he stays in the country we shall have wasted our time. I'm gambling on his returning to London, with the car that met him taking him back to the station. I'm mighty curious about that car—or rather, the owner of it."

"The car might take Norman back to London," Ginger pointed out.

"In which case we shan't see him. That's a chance we shall have to take. He may start on his way back before we get there, so as soon as we arrive I'll ring Gaskin to check that. You heard him say he's keeping a man at King's Cross to watch the trains."

Leaving the main road at Hatfield they ran into Hertford in a little over the hour. Biggles drove straight to the North station and 'phoned Inspector Gaskin from the call box.

"So far he hasn't returned by train," Biggles told Ginger, when he came back. "All we can do now is wait. It may be a long job, but it could turn out to be worth a little patience. Whatever happens Norman mustn't see us here. I'll back the car against the wall over there. That'll give us a clear view of the station entrance and leave us free for a quick move in either direction should one be necessary."

With the car in the position he had indicated Biggles switched off, lit a cigarette and settled down to wait.

"It's no use trying to guess whether Norman's staying in the town or

somewhere in the surrounding country," he said, after a while. "If I had to make a guess I'd say the country. Judging from the number of buses running into the town centre it wouldn't have been necessary to send a car for him if he was only going as far as that."

An hour passed. Two hours. The day wore on.

"If we're going to muscle into this sort of racket we'd better start to carry emergency rations," muttered Ginger, irritably, after a glance at his watch had told him it was past five o'clock.

However, their vigil was rewarded when, soon afterwards a well-kept black Daimler ran quietly to a stop against the curb on the opposite side of the road.

"There he is," breathed Ginger, tersely, as Norman stepped out and walked briskly to the station entrance. "I've got the number of the car."

"Keep your head down," ordered Biggles.

Ginger thought they were going to lose the car which, without waiting for Norman to enter the booking hall, had started to move. But this, it turned out, was to enable the uniformed chauffeur to back into a side road immediately opposite the station in order to face the direction from which he had come. Even so, the car did not stop, but at once began its return journey. With Norman within a dozen paces of him Biggles dare not move. Not until Norman had disappeared into the booking hall did he start the car and move on to the open road in pursuit of the Daimler.

"Good thing that car had to turn or we'd have lost it," said Biggles, with his eyes on the big car, which by this time had a lead of a hundred yards or so. There was no traffic to speak of so he left the gap between the two cars at that distance. "How easy it is to slip up," he went on. "I assumed the car would pull up on the station side of the road; at the station entrance, in fact; but I was wrong. The driver of the Daimler could hardly have been suspicious of anything but he had no intention of hanging about once he had got rid of his passenger. Did you get a good view of him?"

"Yes," answered Ginger. "He's an elderly man. About fifty, I'd say. Looked like a professional chauffeur. He was in uniform so he must work for somebody who keeps up an establishment. The car number is CYM 618."

"He's heading for the country, anyway," observed Biggles, as the cars, keeping their distance, and still with little traffic on the road, cruised through a landscape of typical rural England.

Soon after they had passed through the village of Waterford, as a name board announced, the Daimler took a side turning into what proved to be a lane with high banks and hedges, and so narrow that two vehicles would have found it difficult to pass.

"I don't care for this but I'm going to see it through," muttered Biggles, turning into the lane. "This can be used so little by motor traffic that the driver of the car in front of us, should he be watching the rear in his reflector, might tumble to the idea that we're following him. It's a risk but we shall have to



take it.”

“We shall soon know,” replied Ginger. “If he thinks that he’ll speed up and maybe lead us a pretty dance round lanes which he probably knows, and we don’t.”

Apparently, however, the driver had not noticed them, or if he had thought nothing of it, for presently he turned into a drive which, Ginger observed as they passed it, disappeared into a tall shrubbery of rhododendrons and ornamental trees, behind which, at some distance, rose the several chimneys of a house of some size. Biggles did not stop, but continued on up a low but longish hill. “Did you get the name of that place?” he asked Ginger. “I had to keep the car straight so I couldn’t look.”

“No. There was a white gate, fastened back, but if there was a name on it I didn’t see it. There was nothing on the gate-posts.”

“Let’s ask this chap,” said Biggles, bringing the car to a halt beside a farm labourer engaged in trimming the hedge. Lowering the window he asked: “Would you please tell me the name of the house I’ve just passed?”

“You must mean Gortons, sir; it’s the only one,” was the reply, politely given.

“I’m looking for the residence of Mr. Smithson,” prompted Biggles.

The countryman shook his head. “He don’t live at Gortons, sir. Never heard tell of anyone of that name in these parts. It’s a Mister Carlton, Mister Eustace Carlton, what lives at Gortons now.”

“Then he hasn’t been there long?”

“Twelve months come Michaelmas.”

“Thanks, much obliged,” acknowledged Biggles, and drove on.

At a cross-roads, about a mile farther on, he again stopped the car and lit a cigarette. “The next question is, what business has a London jewel thief with a country gentleman known as Mr. Carlton, although that is probably an assumed name? I would have liked to ask our hedge-clipping friend a few questions about Mr. Carlton, but I daren’t press him too hard. You know how these country folk talk. He might have a friend or relation working in the gardens, in which case word would go back that some strangers had been asking questions. I mentioned the name Smithson, of course, to create an impression that we were really looking for a man of that name.”

“So I realized.”

Biggles finished his cigarette and looked at his watch. “By thunder! Do you realize it’s turned six o’clock?”

“I certainly do,” retorted Ginger. “My stomach’s falling out. It’s about time we had something to eat. That signpost says the road to the left goes to Hertford so I suggest we press on and have something to eat while I have the strength to hold a knife and fork.”

Biggles hesitated. “I’m tempted to have a closer look at this place Gortons but I don’t think we’d better risk it in daylight—not in this car, anyway. If the driver of the Daimler spots it cruising up and down he’d be a fool if he didn’t

wonder what it was doing. If Gortons is a crooked set-up, and I don't see how it can be anything else, the people who live there will be as jumpy as those who pass their time in the Barn. No matter. We've done what we came to do so we'll waffle back to Hertford and have a bite of food. I saw a residential hotel nearly opposite the station."

"You're not by any chance thinking of staying the night in Hertford?" inquired Ginger, as Biggles started the car.

"I was turning it over in my mind with a view to exploring Gortons after dark," admitted Biggles. "But considering the sort of people we're dealing with it would probably be a waste of time. In any case, not having brought any kit with us, it would be awkward to stay at an hotel. I have a better idea than that."

"What is it?"

"Tomorrow we'll have a look at Gortons from the air and get the general layout of the place. We could take some photos at the same time for future reference. I'm mighty curious about the place. Norman didn't come down just for a breath of sweet fresh air."

They cruised back to the town and turned into the private car park of the hotel Biggles had remarked. A notice board having informed them that meals were served to non-residents they went in, had a wash, and presently sat down to a satisfying, much needed meal. Feeling better for it they lingered over their coffee, but had at last gone into the hall, where they had left their headgear, with a view to moving off, when the door was pushed open from outside and two men came in.

Shocked and incredulous, hardly able to believe his eyes, Ginger stared at them—at one of them in particular. At that moment he assumed, naturally, that the meeting was sheer coincidence; but later, as Biggles was to point out, considering where they were and what they knew, there was really nothing remarkable about it.

One, a tall fair man in the early thirties, wearing an outsize moustache, he did not know. The other was the man who, wearing an R.A.F. tie, had met Biggles at Victoria Station to buy the gold pendant. He still wore the R.A.F. tie.

They all came face to face so suddenly that there was not the slightest hope of Biggles passing without being recognized by one of the men. That he might be recognized by both was a thought that did not enter Ginger's head.

The man with the R.A.F. tie was staring at Biggles as if he, too, had been taken aback by the encounter. Which was understandable. But it was the other man who spoke. A broad smile spread over his face. "Well—well! " he exclaimed. "If it isn't Biggles! Fancy meeting you. What on earth are you doing here?"

The mention of the name struck Ginger like a douche of cold water. But worse was to come.

Without waiting for Biggles to answer his question, the man went on,

cheerfully: “I heard you’d joined the police force.”

## CHAPTER VI

### A DANGEROUS ENCOUNTER

GINGER knew from experience that at such moments as this Biggles was at his best. However acute the shock his self-possession could rise to the occasion. Whether this was a natural attribute, or the result of having his reactions sharpened at an early age by air combat, he did not know. The present instance was no exception. The shock of suddenly coming face to face with the man to whom he had sold the gold pendant mount on Victoria Station, a man who he had good reason to suppose was one of a gang of jewel thieves, must have been tremendous, and might well have left him speechless.

It did nothing of the sort. His expression changed, but only to break into a smile in which incredulity and amusement were registered. "You heard what?" he queried.

"I was told you'd joined the police."

"Who told you that?"

"Tug Carrington. I ran into him one day in Piccadilly—oh, it must have been best part of twelve months ago."

Biggles made a gesture of disdain. "Oh, Tug. He always did get things tangled up. It's true that at that time the police had a certain interest in me; but ask yourself; can you see me standing in the middle of the road directing the traffic?"

"I must say that takes a bit of imagination," was the laughing reply. "But here, meet a friend of mine, Verney Laxter."

"I fancy we've met before, somewhere," said Laxter, in a curious voice, as they shook hands.

"I was thinking the same thing," returned Biggles, blandly, and went on to introduce Ginger. "Meet one of the old crowd, Bill Reverley, better known as Rev," he said, and Ginger shook hands with the man who had called Biggles by name, and, in so doing, he feared, dropped a brick that was likely to have some awkward repercussions, even though Biggles was doing his best to gloss the matter over.

Laxter's first question was almost inevitable. "What are you doing here?" he asked, looking hard at Biggles.

"We dropped in for a bite of food," answered Biggles, truthfully.

"Then you're not staying here?"

"Good lor', no. We've merely been having a look round the district."

"For what?"

"Let's say a spot of fresh air." One of Biggles' eyelids flicked in a wink. "We were on the point of starting back for London when you came in."

"No hurry," returned Laxter. "How about a drink? They have a comfortable little bar here. We popped in for one."

From which Ginger judged that he was hoping to delay their departure in order to ask a few questions.

They went through to the bar lounge.

After drinks had been ordered Reverley turned to Laxter and said in a semi-confidential manner: "If you need a man who really knows how to handle a flying-machine, here he is." He indicated Biggles.

"Is that so," replied Laxter, who appeared to be struggling hard to keep pace with the situation.

Biggles now put a question. Looking at Laxter he said: "Are you still flying?"

"What gave you the idea I'm a pilot?"

Biggles smiled faintly. "If you don't want to be associated with aviation you'd better stop wearing that tie."

It seemed to Ginger that for a moment Laxter looked startled. However, he went on. "Why did you ask me if I was still flying?"

"Oh, I just wondered if you knew of anyone looking for a spare pilot," Biggles answered casually, as if the suggestion was of no real importance.

Reverley stepped in again. "Laxter runs an exclusive little flying club not far from here."

Laxter frowned, as if he would rather this piece of information had not been divulged. He said nothing, but it was obvious to Ginger, who was watching closely, that he was doing some hard thinking.

"Well, we shall have to be pushing along," said Biggles, finishing his drink. "Can I give either of you a lift back to Town?"

The offer was declined, no reason being given. Said Laxter to Biggles, "You still at the same place, if I want to contact you?"

"Yes. We shall be there for a day or two, I expect. We don't stay anywhere very long," he added, meaningly.

"Which reminds me," went on Laxter. "I understood your name was Walls."

"It's as good as any, and an easy one to remember," averred Biggles, smoothly.

"Why did Rev call you Biggles?"

Reverley answered for himself. "That was his nickname in the Service. Everyone called him that. In fact, I've never heard him called anything else."

Biggles stood up. "Well, we'll get along. Be seeing you again some time." "Cheerio."

With that they parted.

Biggles nudged Ginger as they stepped on to the gravel drive. Standing near the entrance was a big car. It was the Daimler, CYM 618.

"So that's how they got here," said Biggles, softly. "Laxter must have brought Reverley in."

"Looks as if Reverley's staying at Gortons," murmured Ginger.

"Yes. Unless Laxter has just met him at the station, or maybe brought him

in to catch a train.”

They walked across to the car park. Not until they were in their seats and Biggles had pressed the starter did he speak again. “Phew!” he whistled softly. “That was a facer if you like. I hope I didn’t show it but I felt like going through the floor when Laxter walked in. And as if that wasn’t bad enough Rev Reverley must blurt out my name—or half of it.”

“Does he know the rest of it?”

“He may, or he may not. You heard what he said. I thought for a moment we were in for a showdown. That collision was my own fault. I should have had more sense than to choose a restaurant right on the enemy’s doorstep, so to speak.”

“Who’s this fellow Reverley?”

“A pilot. He was a Pathfinder in the war. The fact that he knows Laxter suggests he might have been one, too. I ran into Rev several times during the war but that’s really all I know about him, except that I have a vague idea he became an instructor at one of the clubs—the South Wessex, I believe—after he left the Service.”

“What’s he doing with Laxter?”

“That’s what I’d like to know,” answered Biggles, as, on the open road, he headed for London. “I can’t believe he’s gone off the rails. He never struck me as that sort of chap. The meeting might have been accidental, or, if they were both Pathfinders, they might have kept in touch.”

“What’s going to be the upshot of this?”

“Ask me something easier. It’s a queer mix-up,” went on Biggles. “Laxter, our friend of the R.A.F. tie, which I fancy he’ll not wear again, knows me as a crook named Walls. And he knows I know him to be a crook, since he was prepared to buy stolen jewellery. He also knows, thanks to Rev, that I’m a pilot. Again, he knows that I know he’s one—or I assume he is, although of course he may be air crew or ground staff. I feel pretty sure now that he went either to the Air Force Club or the Aero Club after pinching that car. That took nerve, and from the slick way he did it I’d wager it wasn’t the first time he’d done that. I’d say he’s been off the rails for some time. It takes a bit of working out, and that’s what Laxter is trying to do at this moment, for if we have plenty to think about, so has he. I have a feeling that our coming here is either going to lead to something sensational, as the papers say, or blow our little game sky-high.”

“It begins to look more and more as if Gaskin’s hunch about aviation coming into the picture wasn’t far off the mark.”

“You’re right. This alleged exclusive little flying club makes that almost a certainty. Laxter wasn’t at all pleased when Rev let that drop. The fact that Rev mentioned it suggests that if this club is a shady set-up he doesn’t know it. It must be at, or near, Gortons. All I can say is, it must be very exclusive indeed, for I’ve never heard of it. If it’s genuine it’ll be on the register. We can soon check on that.”

“But if Rev knows about it, and is down here, surely he must be tied up with it in some capacity,” opined Ginger.

“Not necessarily. Why did he say to Laxter, if you’re looking for a pilot here’s your man—meaning me. That implies Laxter is in fact looking for a pilot. Rev would never have suggested that I’d join a show that wasn’t straight. It looks more as if he’d been offered a job at the club but had turned it down, even without knowing it wasn’t on the level. It would only have to smell a bit fishy for him to say no, and rightly so. With his experience he could get a job anywhere, so why risk his ticket?”

“If he suspected the thing was phoney why did he suggest you for the job?”

Biggles thought for a moment. “He couldn’t have been serious. Either that or he was taking the mickey out of Laxter, knowing if anything underhand was going on I’d soon spot it. We’ll get to the bottom of it presently.”

“Are we going straight home?”

“Possibly. But give me a minute or two to think about it, to get some of these loose ends sorted out. Remember, Gus Norman has reason to be suspicious of us. Now, so has Laxter. If those two get together and compare notes—and don’t forget that Norman goes to Gortons—it won’t do for us to be seen either at the Barn or down here. We’ve been going a bit too fast, and may have overshot the objective.”

Silence fell. The car sped on towards London.

They were in the suburbs before Biggles spoke again. “I’m going to look in at the Barn,” he decided. “It may be for the last time.”

“Why?”

“Because the hunt has switched to this place Gortons. The next step must be to find out what’s going on there. That can keep until tomorrow.”

“Why go to the Barn?”

“Norman may be there. He’s in this, and I want to know how he feels about us. He may have got us weighed up, or he may not. If we meet him we shall soon know.”

“What are you going to do with the car?”

“Park it in a garage for the night. Tomorrow, I’ll tell Gaskin to collect it.”

“We shall need a car.”

“We’ll use our own. Laxter may have taken the number of this one, in which case it wouldn’t do for it to be seen hanging about Hertford. It’s about time we made contact with Algy and Bertie, too. They may have some news. Anyway, I can now find them something more definite to do.”

Parking the car in a garage near Victoria they boarded a bus for the Barn.

They found the usual little coterie there, including Norman, who was standing alone at the bar, and from the colour of his face had evidently taken more drink than was wise. This was confirmed by his speech when they joined him.

Here we go, thought Ginger, as Biggles strolled up to the bar.

“Where have you been?” demanded Norman belligerently.

"Why?" queried Biggles evenly. "Have you been looking for me?"

"Not particularly."

"Then why get stewed up about something that doesn't matter?"

"Have a drink," almost ordered Norman.

"No thanks."

"Why not?"

"I may have some work to do tonight."

"Like digging up some more bits of green glass," sneered Norman, who was apparently one of those who become aggressive when they have had too much to drink.

"All right," retorted Biggles. "Anyone could have made that mistake. If there was any bad luck hanging to it, it was mine, so let it drop."

Norman switched to the subject that may have been responsible for his condition. "You've heard what happened to Stony?"

"I read about it in the papers."

"The fool," rasped Norman viciously. "Do you know what he did? Snatched a car. Had the bogies jumped him a minute later I should have been taken for a ride with him. He must have been out of his mind."

"How so?"

"He drove right up to where I was waiting for him."

"Did he know that?"

"Of course he did. I had arranged to take him where he'd have been as snug as a bug in a rug. But no," concluded Norman bitterly, "he had to lift a car."

Biggles nodded. "He must have been in a hurry."

"Bah! He should know by now that a hot car screams its head off. In the rush hour he wouldn't have been spotted on the Underground, or in a bus." Norman ordered another drink. "What brings you here?"

"I merely looked in to see if there was any news."

"Smarm round that clot Gaskin again," jeered Norman.

"I don't smarm round anybody," stated Biggles coldly. "He got your money back for you last night so why get steamed up about him? If that's the mood you're in you can go on swilling whisky by yourself. Take my tip and lay off. You're talking too much. I'm going. Come on, Ginger."

Leaving Norman glaring they went out.

"He's savage about Stony, so he tries to get it off his chest by getting drunk," observed Biggles, when they were outside. "No matter. I know what I went in to find out. He couldn't have seen Stony to speak to or he'd have taken a different line with us. I've one more thing to do and that's make contact with Algy. I'll 'phone him at the flat from Victoria."

They took the bus to the station where Biggles put through a call to their communal home in Mount Street. Bertie answered.

"It's me," announced Biggles.

"Here, I say old boy, we were wondering what had happened to you,"



declared Bertie. "What have you been up to?"

"I'll tell you tomorrow. Is Algy there?"

"Yes. Do you want to speak to him?"

"No. You'll do. Have you anything to report?"

"Not a bally thing, and we've been buzzing around like a brace of blowflies."

"All right," replied Biggles. "I've plenty to tell you, but it's a bit late to get together tonight. Moreover, we might be watched. I'll see you both in the morning, but I have reasons for not wanting to go near the office. Let us say nine o'clock at Victoria, in the refreshment room. Bring a map of Hertfordshire with you. Come in the car and park it somewhere handy."

"Fair enough, chaps, we'll be there," promised Bertie.

"So long." Biggles hung up. "Let's go home to roost," he told Ginger. "We've had quite a day— and we may have another tomorrow."

"Are you going to tell Gaskin what's cooking?" asked Ginger, as they walked towards their hotel in Gillingham Street.

"There will be plenty of time for that," returned Biggles. "Let's get on more solid ground before we bring him into it. A fine day tomorrow may enable us to do that."

"Is this where we start flying?"

"Probably, if the weather's good enough for photography." They walked on.

<sup>1</sup> Thieves' slang for 'arrested'.

## CHAPTER VII

### ACCIDENT OR MURDER?

BIGGLES and Ginger, almost the only customers, were sipping coffee in a quiet corner of the Victoria refreshment hall when, the following morning, Algy and Bertie arrived at the rendezvous.

"I was beginning to get worried about you," Algy told Biggles, as he pulled up a chair. "Why haven't you been home?"

Biggles smiled wanly. "In this murky game into which we've drifted everybody seems to watch everybody else; consequently we have to be careful where we go and who we're seen talking to. Any news?"

"Not a thing," answered Algy, morosely. "And that's not for want of trying," he asserted. "Bertie and I have been round all the clubs within striking distance of London, asking questions, and for all we've learnt we might as well have stayed at home. There are a few private owners still to check up on but that'll take time."

Biggles nodded. "Fair enough. You couldn't do more. By the way, did you call at the South Wessex Club in your travels?"

"We did. Matter of fact we were there yesterday afternoon."

"Who did you speak to?"

"The secretary."

"Do they still employ an instructor named Bill Reverley—an ex-service pilot who used to be known as Rev?"

Algy did not answer at once. He stared at Biggles with an extraordinary expression creeping over his face. "Why do you ask that?"

"Do they?"

"Well, they did."

"What do you mean—did? Isn't he there now?"

"No. Didn't you hear the eight o'clock news?"

"We haven't a radio at our hotel. What's happened? Out with it. Don't stand there stalling."

"He's dead."

"*Dead!*"

"He was killed yesterday."

"How?"

"In a crash."

It took Biggles a moment to recover. "There must be some mistake about this," he said confidently. "We were talking to him at eight o'clock last night."

Algy shrugged. "Then it must have happened after that."

"What do you know about this?"

"Only what came over the radio."

"What did it say?"

“It simply said that a man going to work had found a crashed aircraft. The pilot, who was flying alone, was dead, and had been identified as William Reverley, a well-known instructor.”

“Where did it happen?”

“Apparently somewhere in Hertfordshire. It mentioned that, now I come to think of it.”

“Was Reverley at the club when you were there?”

“No. I asked for the chief instructor intending to get a line on any night flying that was being done but I was told he wasn’t there. He was in the air, in his own machine, an Auster. Nobody seemed to know where he’d gone. I got his name, Reverley, from the secretary. I don’t think I’d ever met him. Anyway, after hanging about for a bit we decided not to wait any longer. It didn’t seem all that important.”

“And that’s all you know?”

“That’s all. Why are you so upset about this? Was Reverley a friend of yours?”

“Not exactly a friend, but I met him once or twice during the war and he struck me as a nice fellow apart from being a stout pilot.”

“How came you to meet Reverley yesterday, old boy?” put in Bertie.

“It’s a longish story. I’ll tell you all about it presently,” returned Biggles. His face was slightly pale and his expression grim as he went on, speaking to Ginger, “The first editions of the evening papers should be out by now. Slip across to the bookstall and get one.”

Ginger was away less than a minute and came back with the paper in his hand. “There’s just an inch in the stop press column,” he announced. “It’s true all right. The machine was found by a farm worker in a park near the village of Watton. Pilot identified as William Reverley. That’s all. Watton can’t be far from Gortons. I remember seeing the name on a signpost.”

For some seconds Biggles did not speak. He took a cigarette from his case, tapped it pensively on the table and lit it. Then he looked at Ginger. “It might, of course, have been an accident,” he said slowly. “On the other hand, remembering the conversation we had with him, and considering who he was with, it might not—although, no doubt, it looks like one. I wonder... Rev was obviously on pretty good terms with Laxter, and had, we may suppose, flown over to meet him. That was not an accidental meeting. It must have been arranged by Laxter. We know that Rev was already in a good job. We also have good reason to believe that Laxter was looking for a pilot. Somehow he got in touch with Rev. Rev flew over. He was offered the job and turned it down. We’d already worked that out from the conversation. It couldn’t have meant anything else. Why did Rev turn down the job?”

“Maybe the money wasn’t good enough—that’s the usual reason,” suggested Algy.

“No. That won’t do,” replied Biggles. “Laxter must have been prepared to offer more money than Rev was earning as an instructor or why should he

expect Rev to give up his job? But Rev declined. Why? He must have had a reason. I can't believe it was because he suspected there was something shady about it or he wouldn't have hinted that I might take it—unless that was his idea of a joke.”

“He may have had his suspicions aroused, or confirmed, after we left them,” suggested Ginger.

“That could have happened,” agreed Biggles. “Naturally, sooner or later he would have to be told exactly what the job was. It may have been one for which his experience as a war-time Pathfinder made him particularly suitable—bearing in mind that a Pathfinder could find his way about Europe in the dark. Did Laxter contact him for that very reason? Be that as it may, if Rev had suddenly realized that Laxter's show was crooked he would know more than was good for his health. He might have talked. In fact, I'm pretty sure he would have done. Laxter may have realized that, too. Rev, being an outspoken sort of chap might have been unwise enough to say so. Laxter, or Laxter's boss, couldn't allow that to happen. Rev had to be silenced, and what easier way than to sabotage his machine, which would look like an accident?”

“If the crash occurred in Hertfordshire it must have been soon after he had taken off,” put in Ginger.

“If that crash was a genuine accident then it could only have been due to structural failure,” declared Biggles. “I can't think of any other reason why a pilot of Rev's experience should pile up an inherently stable job like an Auster. The machine must have dropped out of his hands. Given time he could have put it down on a tennis court. I don't suppose for a moment that he'd clutter himself up with a parachute. Apparently the machine didn't catch fire or it would have taken longer to identify the body.” Biggles looked at Algy and Bertie in turn. “Have either of you ever heard of a private club, within a mile or two of Hertford, called Gortons?”

Both denied any knowledge of such a club. “If there is one it isn't registered,” asserted Algy.

Biggles nodded. “I think we shall find there is no such club, although there may be a landing ground. Pass me that map, Algy.”

He unfolded the map on the table. Taking an envelope from his pocket he placed it on the map, and using the edge of it drew a line from Waterford to the South Wessex Club aerodrome. It cut through Watton, about five miles from the presumed point of departure.

“That's it,” said Biggles softly. “Rev was on his way home, dead on course as you'd expect, when he crashed.” He went on with iron in his voice. “If those devils murdered him I'll see they don't get away with it.”

“You realize we're in the dark about this,” complained Algy. “I'm waiting to hear how you came to meet Reverley. Who's this chap Laxter?”

“Sorry,” returned Biggles, “but this crash coming out of the blue has rocked me on my pins. I'll start at the beginning because, as I shall have jobs for you, it's time you knew exactly how things stand. Get some more coffee,

Ginger. This is going to be a long story.”

It took Biggles nearly an hour to bring Algy and Bertie up to date with the case. “Now, with a possible murder in the offing, the thing has a more sinister appearance, and I shall have to revise my plans somewhat,” he concluded.

“What do you want us to do, old boy?” asked Bertie, seriously.

“Well, you’ll realize it won’t do for me, or Ginger, to be seen near this place Gortons, or the scene of the crash, by Laxter or Norman. We know that Norman goes to and fro to Hertford and he might be there now. Laxter, I’d say, is there most of the time.”

“What are these types like, in case we bump into them?” inquired Algy. “I saw Norman’s photograph at the Yard but my memory is a bit hazy because there were others.”

Biggles gave a detailed description of the two men. “Laxter has been wearing an R.A.F. tie, but as a result of something I said he may have discarded it. You may see another of Gaskin’s clients, Swell Noble. You saw his photograph, too. I’m not sure, but I believe he’s in with this gang. He knows Norman, anyway. The chauffeur who drives the Daimler is an elderly man. I don’t think he saw us but I’m taking no chances. He may have noted the number of Gaskin’s car when we were tailing him, which is why I asked you to bring ours along.”

“It’s outside,” informed Algy. “What’s the number of the Daimler?”

“CYM 618,” put in Ginger.

“You haven’t checked up on it?”

“Not yet. I’m assuming we know the name and address of the owner and that’s enough to go on with. Eustace Carlton is probably an alias. We’ll check on the car if need be. We’ll also get Laxter’s record from the Air Ministry. At the moment we have other, more pressing things to do. Here they are. First, you, Algy. I want you to take the car—you’ll need a car—and have a look at Rev’s crash, paying particular attention to the possibility of sabotage. The Air Ministry Inspector of Accidents may have sent someone down but it’s hardly likely he’ll be thinking in terms of sabotage. Don’t mention it if he doesn’t. If he asks what you’re doing—well, show him your police pass and say you’re just checking up for our records—something of that sort. Should he discover signs of sabotage ask him to hold up his report until he’s had a word with me. Note the position of the machine, how it hit the ground, and so on. If any locals are there you may find someone who heard the crash. It might be helpful to know exactly when it happened. You’ll take Bertie down with you, but not to the crash. Drop him off here.” Biggles indicated the secondary road near Waterford.

“Now then, Bertie,” he went on. “You’ll have to do a little foot work. Half a mile or so up this road you’ll see a gate on your right giving access to a drive lined with rhododendrons. That’s Gortons. Have a look at the house. See who’s about. Not far away there must be a landing ground, although it may be no more than a big field. Make a general survey, noting any aircraft or

hangars, or anything that looks as if it might accommodate an aircraft. But I needn't tell you what to do. You can see what I'm trying to get at. Do your best not to be seen. If you are, and you're asked what you're doing, play the bumpkin and pretend you lost your way trying to take a short cut. When you're finished go back to the main road where Algy will pick you up after he's finished at the crash. Fix that between yourselves. That's all. You can start as soon as you like. Any questions?"

"What are you going to do?" asked Algy.

"Taking Ginger with me I'm going to fly over the area to have a look at it from up top-sides, and take some photographs. Ginger can get some obliques while I do the verticals. We'll use Gaskin's car to get to Gatwick."

"Where do we meet when all this is finished?"

Biggles considered the question. "I daren't go near the Yard at the moment, and I don't like going to the flat in case we're being watched. I don't think you should come to our hotel, either."

"Why not move to fresh quarters where we could all be together?" suggested Algy.

"Because certain people will expect to find me at the hotel should they try to get in touch, as there's just a chance they may. Should that happen I want them to find me without having to search London, or maybe wait for me at the Barn. The more naturally I behave the less likely will they be to take fright. For want of a better place let's meet here at, say, six o'clock this evening. We should all be back long before that."

"Okay," agreed Algy. "Six o'clock. We'll move off." He went out, followed by Bertie.

Biggles gave them a few minutes start and he, too, got up. "Let's get mobile," he said.

They went to the garage where they had left Inspector Gaskin's car and used it to take them to the Air Police hangar at Gatwick, where Biggles gave orders for an Auster to be brought out and cameras loaded. This did not take long, and they were soon on their way, heading north.

"I shall just make one run over the objective," stated Biggles, as the northern suburbs began to give way to open country. "It wouldn't be wise to circle the place. To an experienced pilot like Laxter it would be a bit too obvious what we were doing. One run at seven or eight hundred feet should enable us to see all there is to see. You get shots of anything that looks as if it might mean something. If this set-up is what we suspect it to be I wouldn't expect to see aircraft standing in the open in broad daylight, but one never knows. I'll take a strip of verticals. It's a good day for the job, anyhow."

It was in fact a delightful late spring day, with the sky about a quarter covered with billowing masses of white cumulus cloud.

Grossing the traffic-laden Great North Road they were soon within sight of the county town of Hertfordshire, nestling in the centre of a rural countryside comprising farms and parkland. Taking the north road, with its villages strung

out at intervals, they were soon gazing forward and down at the objective.

The house, which stood at least a mile from its nearest neighbours, which were only farm or gamekeepers' cottages, was not as large as Ginger expected. It might in fact have been a farm. On three sides was rough ground with much woodland, usually scrubby hazel or birch, but on the other side, adjacent to the gardens was a broad level field of some twenty acres of grassland. It must originally have been a pasture, but although he had a good look Ginger could see neither sheep nor cattle. He also looked for a white landing circle but failed to find it. At the house end of the field were two large barns, one an open skeleton of the type used for storing hay, and the other, apparently a new brick building, closed. Ginger noticed that it had big double doors, and what was more unusual, a double row of skylights. There was not a soul in sight, nor a vehicle of any sort.

"Just about what I expected to see," remarked Biggles. "Plenty of room to get down there in anything but a heavy machine. Get cracking with your camera."

Ginger began taking shots with a pistol-grip camera designed for oblique photographs from the air. Biggles held the machine straight in level flight until the house was far behind them before swinging round in a wide turn for home. "See anything interesting?" he asked.

"Nothing much, except that the place is a ready-made airfield," answered Ginger. "The barn would hold two light machines comfortably."

"I fancy there are machines in it now," averred Biggles. "I could see wheel tracks in the grass. It must be some time since that grass was grazed off. We'll get back."

They returned to Gatwick, where the cameras were handed over to the ex-R.A.F. staff photographer for their contents to be developed. While this was being done, knowing it would take some time for a dry set of proofs to be produced, they took the opportunity to have a late lunch in the canteen.

It was five o'clock when, with the photographs in a large envelope, they returned to London and parked the car in the same garage as before.

"I don't want to carry these photos about with me so I'll take them to the hotel," said Biggles. "We've plenty of time."

They took a taxi to the corner of Gillingham Street and walked the rest of the way, a matter of only forty or fifty yards. Entering the small hall they came to a halt.

Sitting in the one chair was Laxter.

"Where have you been?" he demanded irritably. "I've been kicking my heels here for a couple of hours waiting for you to come back."

"I didn't say we were going to be in all the time," Biggles pointed out.

Laxter's eyes went to the large envelope in Biggles' hand. "What have you got there?" he inquired.

"That," answered Biggles shortly, "is my business. What's yours?"

"Have you a room here where we can talk?"

“Of course.”

“Then let’s go to it. I want a word with you.”

“This way.” Biggles walked on to the stairs.

Ginger brought up the rear. His brain was busy, but not so much from the fact that Laxter was there. He was trying to recall exactly how Biggles had been carrying the big buff envelope, which he now held under his arm, when he had walked into the hall. For the envelope was one of those supplied for “public service,” and carried across the top, in bold type, the letters O.H.M.S.. Had Laxter seen them? Was that why he had asked “What have you got there?”

Without finding the answer to the question that exercised his mind Ginger followed the others into Biggles’ room.



## CHAPTER VIII

### BERTIE CLIMBS A TREE

BERTIE did not expect to have any serious trouble in carrying out Biggles' instructions regarding a ground-level survey of the establishment known as Gortons, the house and the land around it. After all, this was England, where trespassing on other people's property, while not excusable, can usually be explained, with an apology, provided no damage has been done. Rarely, if ever, is it discouraged by armed force. Wherefore, even taking into account what he knew about the place, that it was not what it pretended to be, Bertie was full of confidence as he strolled up the lane, whistling softly from time to time in competition with the birds that were announcing their appreciation of a fine day.

He came to the drive which, as there was only one, he knew must lead to the house that was his objective. The gate was closed so he did not stop, preferring a less exposed place of entry. He continued on for a little way up gently rising ground until, reaching a spot that appeared to suit his purpose, he forced a passage through the hedge hoping to find himself in a position from where he would be able to get a good view of the house. In this he was not disappointed, although there was a certain amount of interference from shrubs and small trees. This could not be avoided. In any case, by taking a few steps one way or another he could see as much as he needed.

The house, he perceived, while by no means a mansion, was obviously the residence of a person of some standing, covering, with its out-buildings, a fair amount of ground. The gravel drive, curving towards it from the lane, described a circle round the buildings, so that they formed, so to speak, a little island in a sea of shrubs that had once been gardens, but were now much overgrown. From this it was evident that the owner or occupier was not interested in horticulture. A large black car, which Bertie took to be the Daimler, was standing by the front door.

There was only one person in sight. By his clothes he might have been a gardener. Indeed, he carried a tool of some sort, a hoe or a rake, although he was not actually using it. Nor did he stay long in one place. With two Alsatian dogs at his heels he paced the drive more in the manner of a sentry than a workman, a detail that did not escape Bertie's observation. There would have been plenty of work for a genuine gardener to do; and had the man been simply exercising the dogs he would at least have encouraged them to stretch their legs instead of sitting on their haunches, as they did most of the time.

As for the house itself, there was not much to engage attention. It was built of brick, with much unnecessary ornamentation, as was the custom in the Victorian era. To Bertie, who was no architect, it was just a house, having perhaps five or six bedrooms. One thing he did notice was the wireless aerial,

which struck him as being a good deal taller than was necessary for a normal house of that size. He could not see what lay beyond the house on account of a line of trees.

The whole place appeared to be more or less hemmed in by woods, not of tall timber so much as trees of the shrubby kind, birch, hazel and the like. This suited him, for this sort of country offered plenty of cover, and he was soon in the nearest wood, moving along slowly, keeping about the same distance from the house, in order to survey it from the rear. Underfoot, a countless army of wood anemones nodded their white faces above a carpet of dead leaves laid by the previous Autumn. A cock pheasant, brilliant in his new season's plumage, rose with a whirr of wings and a cackle of protest at being disturbed. Bertie raised his hat to it. He heard the Alsations, now out of sight, give tongue, but as he was now some distance away it did not occur to him that he might be the cause.

He was more concerned, indeed, his attention was entirely taken up, by what now came into view; for from within the cover of the wood he could now see what occupied the ground behind the house. It was a grass field of considerable size, so large that, knowing what he was really looking for, he decided that he had found it. Here was ample room to land any aircraft likely to be privately owned. He could see no machines, but he saw a building that might accommodate some, and this, fortunately, was on his side of the field. There were in fact two structures, one being an openwork affair used for storing hay or straw. Some hay, brown with age, remained in it.

The other building, clearly a new one, might normally have been assumed to be a cowshed. Had he not known what he did know, or at any rate suspected, he would have taken that for granted, if, indeed, he had thought about it at all. That this was certainly not its purpose at the moment was revealed by the absence of cattle, or marks to suggest some had recently been there. Moreover, cows would, he felt sure, have eaten or left their marks on the hay that remained in the skeleton building. He could not see inside the new building, and while he knew little of farming he felt that at this hour, and at this time of the year, on such a fine day, any cattle, were they there, would be out in the field grazing.

The field itself, offering nothing of interest beyond what its existence implied, he concentrated his attention on the byre. Within its walls, he had no doubt, would be proof of what he suspected. After all, he reflected, Reverley had spoken to Biggles of a flying club. There must, therefore, be a club in the vicinity. Where was it, if not here? Yet if this was it, where was the usual equipment? Nothing could look less like a meeting place for aviation enthusiasts.

The truth was, decided Bertie, there was no club; or certainly not an organization operating as a club although it might be one in name. Laxter, when he had contacted Reverley presumably to offer him employment, had created an imaginary club to account for the aircraft that were being used at

Gortons. That, Bertie told himself as he moved nearer to the byre, was the answer. Reverley had declined to risk his pilot's licence by having anything to do with a show which, to his experienced eye, was irregular, if nothing worse; and his refusal, it seemed, may have cost him his life. As the saying is, he knew too much.

Bertie was now quite sure that at least one aircraft was housed in the building in front of him. But this was still only surmise. That was not enough. Before Biggles would dare to act there would have to be proof, and as this moment appeared to be as good as any Bertie resolved to get it. Aside from the existence of aircraft it was important to ascertain the types, and their registration letters, so that ownership could be checked and in order that they might be recognized anywhere.

The trouble was, the building had no windows; only large skylights. Whether or not cowsheds were normally provided with windows he did not know, but this one certainly had none. And he thought he knew the reason.

As he stood there, pondering the matter, and considering the best ways and means of obtaining the information he required, two sounds reached his ears to give him pause. The first was the barking of dogs. They seemed to be nearer. The second was the tinkle of metal, as if someone had dropped a tool on a concrete floor. The sound came from the byre. He still thought of it as a byre, or cowshed, although he was now convinced that the building was being used as a hangar, and had, in fact, been put there recently for that purpose. He could not think of any reason for which steel tools would be required in a cowshed. Moreover, he thought he could just make out wheel tracks leading to the front of it. The tracks were too wide for a farm vehicle. Certainly the treads were too narrow for a tractor. He caught, or imagined he caught, the familiar aroma of aeroplane dope.

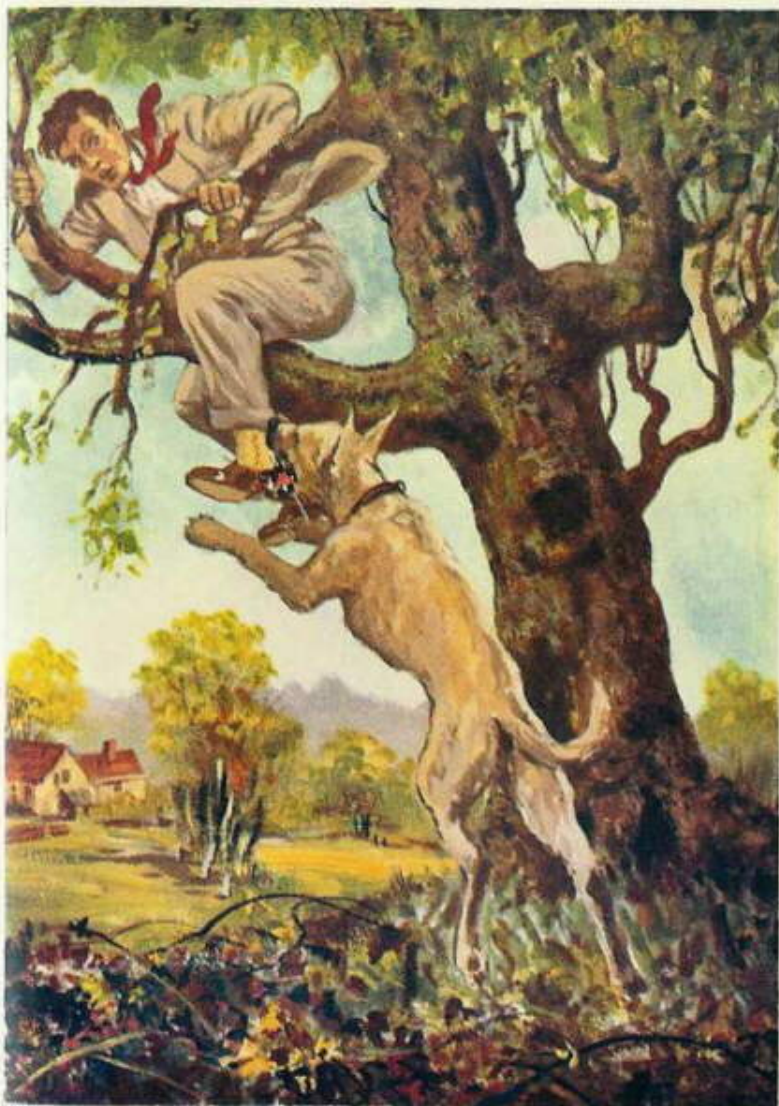
He was confronted by two main problems. There were only two ways by which he might see inside the building. One was through one of the several skylights, although without a ladder he could not see how they were to be reached. In any case, the roof was corrugated iron, and it seemed impossible that he would be able to move on it without being heard by the man, or men, inside. He could make no sane excuse for being on the roof.

The alternative was the door. He couldn't see it because, naturally, it was in the front of the building, and he was behind it. It would have to be the door, he resolved. If he was caught in the act of peeping, he told himself, he could make excuses which in ordinary circumstances would be accepted.

But before he could put his plan into action he was startled to hear the swift patter of galloping feet accompanied by an occasional vicious snarl. Whether the dogs were actually on his trail he did not know; and he did not wait to find out. A pair of Alsations was more than he was prepared to face. He carried a small pocket automatic, but obviously he couldn't use it against two animals which, after all, were only doing what they had been trained to do. He fled, although he knew before he had taken a dozen steps that he would not save

himself by running. The undergrowth prevented him from making any sort of speed; but it wouldn't interfere with the dogs.

The only answer was a tree. He passed several before he came to one which low branches would enable him to climb. He went up it faster than he had ever climbed a tree in his life. Even so, he was only just in time. He had not realized that the dogs were so close. The leader leapt at him as he swung his legs clear, and actually got him by the slack turn-up of his trousers. It nearly pulled him down. For a moment or two the animal hung; then the material parted and it fell, with several inches of Bertie's trousers in its mouth.



Bertie went up faster than he had ever climbed a tree in his life.

*See page 104*

Panting, Bertie went on up to a fork out of their reach, and there made himself secure before adjusting his monocle and gazing down at his pursuers. They, slavering, sat on their haunches staring up at him. "Grrr," growled one. "Grrr to you," growled Bertie.

A man was shouting. Presently he came in sight, running. It was the gardener. He carried a twelve bore gun. He was followed by two others, in blue overalls, possibly the mechanics who had been working in the hangar. Bertie perceived that he had stirred things up, which was to be regretted but could not have been prevented. He had not reckoned on guard dogs.

The man with the gun came up. "What are you doing up there?" he shouted.

"What do you think I'm doing, you fool—birds-nesting?" demanded Bertie caustically, shaken by his narrow escape.

"Come down."

"Not me," replied Bertie, with some wrath. "What do you take me for? If these brutes are yours call them off."

"You're trespassing."

"That doesn't give you the right to set dangerous dogs on me. Look what they've done to my trousers. I shall sue you for damages."

Two more men now joined the party. Both were hatless, as if they had come from the house. Bertie recognized one of them, although it took him a moment or two to place him, for he had only seen his photograph.

It was Swell Noble, the cat-burglar jewel thief. His companion was a man nearer sixty years of age, pale, thin-faced, bald in front and with a short, well-trimmed, greying beard.

This man now spoke. He had a cultured voice, but Bertie thought he detected a slight accent, as if he was a foreigner long resident in England. "What is all this?" he asked, quietly.

Bertie wondered if this could be Carlton as he answered: "I should think it's pretty obvious. Can't a man take a quiet stroll through a wood without being attacked by a pack of ravening wolves?" In the circumstances Bertie's exaggeration may have been pardonable.

"What were you doing?"

"What would I be doing? I was out for a walk. This looked a nice wood so I took a stroll in it to admire the flowers."

"You had no business here. You were frightening my pheasants."

"Frightening your pheasants!" snorted Bertie. "What do you think your beastly bloodhounds were doing to me!"

"I repeat, you had no right to be here."

"Is this wood yours?" questioned Bertie.

"Of course it's mine."

"How was I to know that?"

"You must have known it belonged to somebody."

"I wasn't to know I was entering a private menagerie. Why don't you put up a notice to let people know that if they step on to your land they're liable to be torn to pieces?"

The old man smiled. "They don't like strangers."

"I'd already worked that out," retorted Bertie. "Very well," he went on, "I

admit I was in the wrong and I apologize; but allow me to remind you that there is no law against trespass unless damage can be proved. The only damage has been done by those ferocious hounds of yours. Look what they've done to my trousers." Bertie held out a leg.

Still smiling, the man below surveyed the damage. But the smile turned to a frown when there was borne on the slight breeze a sound which did not surprise Bertie in the least. It was the drone of a light aeroplane, approaching.

Everyone on the ground looked up, taking a position to command a clear view of the sky as Biggles' Auster passed over. Bertie found it hard to keep a straight face as he wondered what Biggles would think could he see what was going on under the tree tops.

There appeared to be a general relaxation as the Auster went straight on. Bertie heard one of the mechanics say softly: "It's all right. He's gone."

The bearded man, who had obviously taken command of the situation, said something to the man with the gun, at the same time patting the dogs, which enabled Bertie to note, with no particular interest, that he had a mutilated right hand, the little finger being missing. The dog handler went off, his charges at his heels.

"You can come down now," Bertie was advised.

Bertie dropped to the ground and brushed the worst results of his hasty climb from his clothes. "What does that feller with the gun shoot at this time of the year?" he inquired.

"Vermin," was the calm reply.

"Here, I say, you're not suggesting that I come into that category," joked Bertie.

"You might have been shot by accident—had my man seen a fox and fired at it, for instance," was the reply.

"I'll remember that," promised Bertie.

"Which way do you want to go?"

"To the nearest road," answered Bertie, promptly. "I don't care much for this wood."

"A wise decision. I'll show you the nearest way," was the somewhat surprising offer. "One hears of so many burglaries these days that one is forced to take protective measures, you know."

"Absolutely," agreed Bertie, as they walked towards the road. "If I had anything worth pinching I'd do the same thing. These burglars are a pest. But there is this about it," he concluded, cheerfully, "they all get caught at the end."

"Do they?"

"Every time," declared Bertie.

Nothing more was said until they reached the road, the one which Bertie had taken to reach the place.

"Don't come back," called the bearded man, as Bertie set off down it.

"I'd be a fool to do that, wouldn't I?" laughed Bertie.

“You would indeed,” was the smooth reply.

Bertie strode on towards his rendezvous with Algy, not quite sure whether his morning’s work had been successful or otherwise. On the whole he decided that he hadn’t done too badly.



## CHAPTER IX

### ALGY SPEAKS HIS MIND

ALGY had dropped Bertie at the junction of the lane that led to Gortons having arranged that whoever finished first should wait for the other at a tea-shop in Waterford village.

He had some trouble in locating the crash, which he learned had occurred on the Woodhall estate, a park embracing many miles of ground. However, he was eventually directed to the spot by a farm worker, and taking one of the private roads that ran across the park as the man had told him, came upon the scene of the tragedy. His eyes had not been idle. The park was well wooded by some fine old trees, but there were, he observed, plenty of places where a light aircraft in difficulties could land, given a reasonable opportunity.

The crash lay beside a small group of oaks about a hundred yards from the road, and he saw that the machine must have struck one of them, for a big branch had been snapped off short. A car was already standing on the road at the nearest point, so parking his own behind it he strode across the rough turf towards where a little group of people indicated the position of his objective. And he had not taken many steps when he observed something for which he was not prepared, something that brought a frown of astonishment, and perhaps dismay, to his forehead. The machine was no more than a charred skeleton, obviously having taken fire and burnt itself out, as well as an area of dry bracken into which it had fallen. Admittedly, Biggles' assumption that there had been no fire was based solely on the prompt identification of the dead pilot.

The spectators included a policeman, one or two men who were obviously estate workers, three small boys and a man in a town suit who was giving orders to an R.A.F. sergeant as he probed about in the wreckage.

Guessing who this man was Algy addressed himself to him, showing his police pass and asking if he was from the Air Ministry. Having received a reply in the affirmative he accounted for his visit by saying he was making a routine check for Air Police records. It was, of course, rather more than that, but he had no wish to be drawn into long explanations as to the real purpose of his visit.

"It gave me a bit of a shock when I saw this," he went on. "I hadn't considered the possibility of fire."

"Why not?"

"Because of the speed with which the pilot was identified. Fire would have made the body unrecognizable. How was it identified?"

"From letters in his pocket."

"I don't understand."

"The body wasn't in the crash."

"I see," said Algy, slowly.

"It was found over there," stated the Accidents man, pointing to a spot some thirty yards away.

Algy's eyebrows went up. "Do you mean he was wearing a parachute and it didn't function?"

"No. There was no parachute."

"But he must have jumped."

"He either jumped or was thrown clear when the machine struck. It looks as if it hit the tree before it went into the ground."

Algy agreed. "What was the cause of death?"

"Multiple injuries, including a broken neck. The sort of thing one would expect of a body hitting the ground when it was travelling as fast as that."

"Have you found anything that might account for the crash?"

"Nothing. When I saw this I didn't really expect to. You know how it is in cases of this sort, with every component fractured or buckled. Fire destroyed any evidence there might have been."

"Yes, I see that," returned Algy, looking at the wrecked fuselage, which was lying on its back with the engine, which had been torn from its bearers, at the end of a furrow it had ripped in the ground. A cylinder had been snapped clean off, evidently the one that had taken the full impact. It was lying in the charred bracken nearby. "It must have been the engine that broke off that branch," he remarked. "I don't think any part of the airframe could have done it."

"There's no doubt about that," concurred the Accidents officer. "One thing that puzzles me is why the pilot jumped. I feel sure he jumped. Had he been thrown out he would have been nearer the machine. You'd have thought a pilot of his experience would have known his best chance was to stay in his seat with the belt fastened and let the machine take the worst of the shock."

"I was thinking that myself," said Algy. "The machine was obviously coming down fast; the force it must have hit the tree proves that. By remaining in his seat he might have had a chance. By jumping he had no chance at all."

"Well, there's nothing more I can do here," said the Accidents inspector. "Matter of fact I was just going when you arrived. I'll get along." He departed, taking his assistant with him, to the car.

Algy considered the wreck thoughtfully for a little while and then strolled over to the policeman. "Did you find this?" he asked.

"No. Mr. Spriggs found it and fetched me." The officer indicated one of the spectators.

"Has anyone any idea of when it happened?" was Algy's next question.

"No, but it must have been early on. The fire had pretty well burnt itself out and the body was stone cold when Spriggs found it, so he says."

"That's right, sir," confirmed Spriggs. "It happens I was out early, and seeing a bit o' smoke came across to find out what it was."

“And you found the body?”

“Not for some minutes. I was just a’ walkin’ away and nearly fell over it. Fair startled me, I can tell you. I ain’t got over it yet. Poor chap.”

Algy walked right up to the remains of the ill-fated aircraft, from which still arose an almost imperceptible miasma of smoke, although anything that would actually burn had long since been consumed.

As the Accidents man had said, in such a tangle of twisted metal it seemed hopeless to try to ascertain the cause of the crash had it been due to structural failure; and if, as was supposed, the machine had not long taken off it could hardly have run out of fuel. As Algy stood there, pondering, a slant of wind brought to his nostrils a faint whiff of smoke. He sniffed. He knew the smell of a burning aircraft only too well, for it is one which, once experienced, is never forgotten. There seemed to be something unusual, something strange, about this. Indeed, it struck him that the whole wreck had a curious, sweet, sickly aroma, which was certainly not the unmistakable reek of oil or doped fabric.

He went round to the engine, which had obviously received the full impact of collision, for as he had already observed, the leading cylinder had been torn from its bed and lay some distance away, as did the buckled remains of the cowling. The soft ground would not have done that, reasoned Algy. The engine must have encountered the thick, low-hanging limb of the tree. It struck him that the cylinders, and the cowling for that matter, had the look of metal that had been overheated. Why had the engine been so hot? It had been wrenched clean off and lay well clear of where the centre of the heat would have been when the machine had burned. To settle any doubts about this, the detached cylinder, which lay outside the radius of the flames, had the same appearance of having been subject to great heat. There was not a vestige of oil left on the walls of the cylinder. Why?

Algy could arrive at only one conclusion. That engine must have been nearly red hot before it hit the ground, he told himself. It couldn’t have got into that condition afterwards. That could only mean it was on fire before it struck. It must have heated up very quickly or the pilot would have had sufficient warning to enable him to choose a better spot on which to try to get down.

That engine heated up very quickly and suddenly burst into flames, reasoned Algy. That was the cause of the crash. If that theory was correct it would explain why Reverley had jumped clear before the machine had struck. With his engine on fire he would have known that the machine would be a mass of flame the instant it touched the ground. Petrol from a fractured tank or broken leads would pour over everything, and if he was still in the cockpit he wouldn’t have a hope of getting out. That was why he had jumped. Anything was better than being trapped. In the same circumstances, reflected Algy, he would have done the same thing.

He stepped back and considered the thing as a whole. It was impossible to

guess at what height the machine had been flying when disaster overtook it; not that that was important; but the bark of broken stump of the branch showed clearly that it was flying away from Gortons. But that was to be expected. If he was thinking on the right lines, mused Algy, the next question to be answered was why had the engine caught fire? Engines did not do that without a reason. He remembered the strange smell and went close to the wreck to refresh his memory. That queer reek still hung about the wreckage.

With a suspicion taking shape in his mind he looked around. One by one the morbid spectators had drifted away. Only the policeman remained. Algy joined him. "Strange nobody heard the crash or saw the fire," he remarked.

"Oh, I don't know about that, sir," replied the officer. "If it happened after eight there wouldn't be anybody about in the park and the nearest public road is close on a couple o' miles away. Lying in a bit of a dip nobody would see the flames, and if they did they'd reckon it was only some dry bracken caught fire. If Mr. Spriggs hadn't come this way to work we might not have known anything about this for a week or more."

Algy nodded. "Are you on duty here?"

"No. I've only been standing about in case I was wanted for anything, till they come to clear up this mess, which I hear will be this afternoon. Meantime, as there don't seem to be much to do I'll away home and have me dinner. Good morning, sir."

"Good morning, officer."

Algy waited until the constable had collected his bicycle from the tree against which he had left it, and set off down the road; then he became busy. From the head of the detached cylinder, with his penknife, he scraped some carbon deposit, collecting it in his handkerchief. He then went to the end of the broken exhaust pipe and did the same thing. He next turned his attention to the petrol tank, which had burst open and examined it closely. There was a slight deposit, evidently left by the burning spirit, which he felt should not be there. It was in the form of black dust, and was not, as he satisfied himself, metallic in character, as might have remained from the intrusion of fused solder.



Algy waited until the constable had collected his bicycle.

As he wrapped the handkerchief carefully and put it in his pocket the slam of a car door made him look up, and he saw that a black Daimler had been parked on the road behind his own car. A man had just stepped out. The Daimler was sideways on to him so he couldn't see the number plates, but he felt that the arrival of a Daimler was not a coincidence. And as the man who

had got out drew nearer he saw that he was right, for he fitted Biggles' description of Laxter. As Biggles had predicted he no longer wore an R.A.F. tie, but a navy blue one with white spots. There was no need to wonder why he had discarded the service tie.

But why, wondered Algy, had he come? Was it to examine something in particular or was he under the influence of that curious urge that is said to bring back a murderer to the scene of his crime. No matter. The bare fact that he had come was full of significance.

Laxter walked up. "This is a nasty mess," he said casually.

"Very nasty," agreed Algy.

"What were you doing as I drove up?"

"Doing?"

"Yes. You seemed to be fiddling about in the wreckage. Are you from the Air Ministry Accidents department?"

"No."

"I expected to find them here."

So that was why he had come, thought Algy. He had hoped to find out if the crash was suspected of being anything other than what it appeared to be.

"Did you want to see the Accidents people for any reason?" he inquired.

"No. No, of course not."

"They've just gone."

"Were they here when you came?"

"Yes."

"Had they any ideas of how this happened?"

"How would I know?"

"They didn't say anything?"

"Why would they talk to me?"

Laxter had a good look at Algy. "What brought you here?"

"Call it curiosity. What brought you here, anyway?"

"I was driving across the park and seeing that something had happened stopped to see what it was."

Algy was watching Laxter's face closely. "Then you didn't know an aircraft had crashed here this morning?"

Laxter started. "This morning!"

"Why yes. When did you think it happened— last night?" inquired Algy evenly, smiling inwardly at his trick that had proved the man a liar. For it was clear now that he knew of the crash, and knowing that it must have happened overnight had been caught off his guard when Algy had said "this morning."

"I—I'd no idea when it happened," declared Laxter.

So that was it, thought Algy. Laxter was hoping to find out if the time of the crash was known as well as if it was regarded as anything but an accident.

"Nobody seems to have seen or heard anything," he said.

Laxter took out his cigarette case. "Cigarette?"

"No thanks."

"I imagine the Air Ministry will decide this was just another accident," prompted Laxter.

"Why should they?" queried Algy, in an off-hand manner.

"What else could it be?"

"Other things have been known to produce results like this."

"Such as?"

Algy was aware that Laxter was looking at him with a curious expression on his face. "Sabotage, for instance."

"But who would sabotage a machine of this type? What purpose could there be in that?" Laxter's lips parted in a smile that was obviously forced. "There is this about it," he went on. "The pilot couldn't have been much of a hand at his job to allow this to happen."

Algy, against his better judgment, allowed this cold-blooded criticism of the dead man to annoy him. I'll give you something to think about, he decided, for there was no longer any doubt in his mind that somehow Laxter had been responsible for the crash. That was why he was there. There could be no other reason.

"On the contrary, I happen to know he was a very able pilot," he said coldly.

"How do you know?"

"He was a friend of mine."

"Is that why you came here?"

"One of the reasons."

"I see," said Laxter, slowly. He raised a shoulder. "Well, he seems to have made a thorough mess of it this time."

"This time? You talk as if you knew him, as if he made a habit of crashing."

"Me? Never heard of him until—"

"Until what?"

"Until I read about this in the paper."

"Have you ever flown an aeroplane?" queried Algy.

"Not likely," lied Laxter fluently.

"Then let me tell you this," said Algy succinctly. "There are times when all the ability in the world won't help a pilot."

"Just what do you mean by that?"

"What I say."

"You—er—think this was such an occasion?"

"It might have been."

"What gives you that idea?"

Algy indicated the crash and the broken tree. "You can see what I can see. Work it out for yourself."

For a brief instant, puzzled no doubt by Algy's manner, Laxter looked worried. "They weren't long identifying the body considering how badly it must have been burnt."

“How do you know it was burnt?”

“Wasn’t it?”

“No. He jumped, but unfortunately he wasn’t wearing a parachute. That may have been his big mistake.”

“Mistake?”

“In flying you never know what you’re going to run into. There are some things for which you can’t make allowances. I don’t think Reverley could have imagined what was to happen to him last night. You’ll agree with that, anyway?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” replied Laxter, curtly.

The return of the police officer put an end to a conversation that was becoming strained. Laxter looked at his watch. “I’ll get along,” he said.

“I will, too,” decided Algy.

Laxter strode briskly towards the car while Algy followed slowly, wondering if he had said too much.

Perhaps he had, he reflected. But the fact that Laxter had come there at all made him angry. If the man had not been actually responsible for the crash he knew who was. That anyone should sabotage a plane was bad enough. That another pilot should do it made his blood boil. Why had Laxter looked at his watch? Had he an appointment to keep? It might, thought Algy, be possible to answer that question.

A uniformed chauffeur, presumably the one of which Biggles had spoken, was sitting in the Daimler. Laxter got in beside him and he drove off. Algy followed, keeping a good distance behind. As he expected, the car in front turned left on reaching the main road, but he was mildly surprised when, instead of turning up the lane to Gortons, it held straight on towards Hertford.

Its objective turned out to be the railway station. He saw the car stop long enough for Laxter to jump out and hurry into the booking hall. That was all he needed to know. Laxter, it could be supposed, was going to London. The Daimler turned and headed back to Waterford, bound presumably for Gortons.

Algy did not trouble to follow it. He gave it a good start and then cruised back over his tracks to keep his appointment with Bertie, and, he hoped, for he had missed his lunch, have a cup of tea and something to eat. He found Bertie waiting, sitting at a table on the lawn of the café, putting in some steady work on a good old-fashioned country tea. He had one good look at him and burst out laughing.

“What’s so funny?” inquired Bertie, frostily, spreading jam on bread and butter.

“What on earth have you been doing to yourself?”

“I had a bit of a do with a brace of Alsations which ended with me doing the cat act up a tree,” informed Bertie lugubriously. “Sit down and stuff yourself with tea cakes while I tell you about it.”

Algy looked at his watch. “Good enough. We seem to be all right for time. Who did these dogs belong to?”



“Carlton.”

“Did you see him?”

“See him? We had quite a natter. He had Swell Noble with him. We parted the best of pals.”

Algy stared. “The deuce you did.”

“We did, indeed,” declared Bertie. “How did you get on?”

“Not too badly, I hope. Laxter was there.”

“That dirty dog? Did you shoot him?”

“No.”

“Then you should have done.”

“I fancy I’ve given him something to think about.”

“That wasn’t enough, old boy. I should have felt inclined to stop him thinking altogether. Would you mind giving the butter a fair wind? Jolly good, what? Nothing like the country for giving you an appetite.”

## CHAPTER X

### LAXTER MAKES A PROPOSITION

TO return to the Gillingham Street hotel, where Biggles and Ginger had found Laxter waiting for them on their return from Gatwick.

If Laxter thought any more about the large envelope Biggles was carrying he gave no indication of it. He made no comment when Biggles opened the top drawer of the cheap chest with which the room was furnished and dropped the envelope in it as if the thing was of no importance. At Biggles' invitation he seated himself on the one shabby chair provided. Biggles and Ginger sat on the bed.

Biggles lit a cigarette. "Now, what's it all about?" he prompted.

"I suppose you know that Reverley has been killed in a crash?" began Laxter.

"I saw it in the paper," said Biggles. "Queer that it should happen so soon after we had been talking to him."

"Very queer. But as you know, these things happen. In a way I feel partly responsible."

"How so?"

"As you may have guessed, he had been to see me and was on his way home when it happened."

"Have you reported that to the authorities?"

"No. What purpose would it serve? Poor old Rev is dead and nothing can bring him back to life."

"Quite so. Is this what you've come to tell me?"

"No. Have you told anyone you saw him with me?"

"Why would I?" Biggles smiled cynically. "The police might ask me what I was doing at Hertford."

"I was hoping you'd have the sense to take that line," said Laxter, with a tone of relief in his voice.

"Now suppose you tell me what brought you here," suggested Biggles.

"I'm coming to that. You'll remember the conversation we had in that pub at Hertford?"

"Perfectly well."

"Rev mentioned you were a pilot and there was some talk of you being prepared to take a flying job."

"I remember."

"Were you serious about that?"

"Certainly—provided it's made worth my while."

"Done any night flying?"

"Quite a lot."

"At home or abroad?"

“Both.”

“Over France?”

“Plenty. I know my way around.”

“Were you a Pathfinder by any chance?”

“No. Special Air Service.”

“Spy dropping, and that sort of thing?”

“Yes.”

“Good. You should be the very man I’m looking for.”

“Just a minute,” said Biggles. “I’m waiting to hear if you’re the man *I’m* looking for.”

“Fair enough,” returned Laxter. “This is the proposition. I’m associated with a business man; a financier in a big way. In fact, I’m his aviation manager. I can’t tell you his name but that needn’t matter to you. He’s an international figure. He handles money in millions, for which reason every move he makes is front page news. You know how these reporters ferret things out.”

“Only too well.”

“Exactly. It boils down to this. My boss can’t go anywhere without a lot of speculation as to what he’s doing. He’s almost afraid to use the telephone for fear of the line being tapped by some news hound or Stock Exchange spy. Naturally, that wouldn’t do, but it’s the price you have to pay for being a millionaire.”

“I follow.”

“Very well. To save a lot of trouble, when he has an important deal on he travels by air, but rather than be seen in public transport, which would defeat his object, he uses his own machine. He sends messages in the same way.”

“That sounds an expensive pastime.”

“Pah! Not when millions are involved. It’s mere chicken feed to him.”

“And you’re his pilot?”

“I used to be. I could still fly at a pinch, but having to take care of the arrangements it isn’t always convenient for me to get away. For which reason it was decided that I ought to have a second pilot on the spot for emergencies.”

Biggles nodded. “I get it. Hence the exclusive flying club Reverley mentioned.”

“Sure. But as you’ve probably guessed that’s only a cover. Naturally, we try to keep the thing quiet, but there had to be an excuse for maintaining an aircraft.”

“What is it?”

“An Auster.”

“Just one?”

“That’s enough. It’s all we need.”

Biggles stubbed his cigarette. “Would I be right in guessing that you offered Bill Reverley this job?”

“Yes.”

“You knew him?”

“We were in the same unit in the war.”

“From what he said about me being the man you were looking for I gather he turned the job down.”

“Yes.”

“Why? Wasn’t the money good enough?”

“The money was all right. I knew what he was getting at the South Wessex and bumped that up quite a bit. It wasn’t that.”

“What was it?”

“Oh, he went all righteous on me,” sneered Laxter. “Made all sorts of daft excuses about regulations, the risk of losing his ticket, and so on.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Well, obviously, if my boss landed at official airports he would be recognized by somebody, and that would kill the whole point of trying to keep the trip secret. If he had to do that he might as well travel on one of the regular services and have done with it. To get over that difficulty he has organized one or two landing grounds for his own private use. As I said just now, he doesn’t always go with the machine. It may be that he wants to send a secret despatch.”

“How often does this happen?”

“Only once in a while. For which reason there would be no need for you to hang about. I’d call you only when I needed you. So, as you see, it’s practically money for nothing. You’d be paid a regular screw with a bonus for every trip you did. You’d find it safer, and more profitable, than risking a five year stretch for lifting an emerald that turns out to be a bit of green glass. On the job I’m offering you, what can they do to you if you’re caught? Fine you a fiver, probably, for an infringement of regulations. It’s easy money for a man who can really fly, and knows his way around.”

“How do you know how well I can fly?”

“If Reverley says you’re good, that’s good enough for me.”

“And that’s why you came to me?”

“It’s one reason.”

“What’s another?”

“Knowing what I knew about you over that phoney pendant I felt you wouldn’t be squeamish over so small a matter as breaking a regulation or two. In fact, I don’t care whether you hold a current licence or not as long as you can do the job.”

“Can you engage me on your own account or do I have to see the boss?”

“I can book you, but he may want to have a word with you, particularly as you may have to fly with him in the back seat.”

Biggles lit another cigarette. “That’s understandable. I’d think twice myself before I put my life in the hands of some ham-fisted amateur. But let’s get this straight from the start. You can come clean with me. I mean, there was no

need for you to shoot a line about financiers and what have you. From time to time you have something or somebody that you want taking across the Channel. Right?"

"Yes."

"Okay. When do we start?"

"I can't say at the moment. Are you going to stay here?"

"Yes, if it suits you. It suits me."

"All right. I'll let you know when something's cooking." Laxter looked at his watch. "Now that's settled I must be getting along. You'll be hearing from me."

"Okay. If that's all I'll see you out."

Biggles saw Laxter to the door, watched him turn the corner and returned to Ginger.

"So now you're on the pay-roll," murmured Ginger.

"That was what I wanted. That's what I've been playing for all the time. It was the only way of reaching the boss. It has turned out to be easier than I expected."

"Talk about being on thin ice!" muttered Ginger. "If, after this, they get wise as to who you are, you've had it. They made no bones about bumping off Reverley, and that was merely for turning down the job after he knew what it was."

"We're not sure of that yet. We may know more about it when we've had a word with Algy. Which reminds me. We'd better be getting along. We're a bit late for the appointment and Algy will be wondering what's kept us. You know how he fusses if everything isn't on time—although that's probably my own fault. No matter. I had to see that business with Laxter through to the end. It was the opportunity I'd been hoping for."

"What worries me," said Ginger, "is this. Did Laxter see the O.H.M.S. on that envelope? If he did he's bound to wonder how that hooks up with your reputation as a crook."

Biggles frowned. "I agree. I'd better not leave those photographs lying about in case he did see what was on the envelope and sends someone to have a look at what's inside. I'll take the photos with me and Algy can take them back to Gatwick. We can look at them there if need be."

Biggles took out the photographs and wrapped them in a sheet of newspaper. "Better not leave the envelope empty," he said, looking round. "Give me that book lying over there. That'll do." He put the book in the envelope and placed it carefully in the drawer. "Let's go," he concluded.

They found Algy and Bertie waiting at the rendezvous, crowded at this hour.

"You're late," challenged Algy.

"We had reason to be," Biggles told him.

"What happened?"

"When we got home we found Laxter waiting for us."

“So that’s where he was going,” said Algy. “I saw him making for a train at Hertford station.”

Biggles was looking at Bertie. “What have you done to yourself? You look as though you’d run through a wood backwards.”

“Not backwards, old boy,” corrected Bertie. “Forwards. And on full throttle, with a brace of Alsatians on my tail. Those blighters keep dogs, big dogs with big teeth. Jolly nearly lost my pants.”

“I must remember that,” returned Biggles, seriously. “All right. What’s the news? Let’s start with you, Bertie.”

Bertie gave an account of his adventures and the result of his reconnaissance.

“Now you, Algy. How did you get on?” requested Biggles, when Bertie had finished.

Algy’s story took rather longer to tell, since it involved his conversation with Laxter and his suspicions as to the cause of the crash. Biggles listened intently without an interruption.

“So you think it was the petrol,” he said, at the conclusion.

“I’m pretty sure of it.”

“What do you think had been put in it?”

“I’d say sugar.”

“That would have done it,” agreed Biggles. “Putting sugar in the petrol was a trick of saboteurs in the Kaiser’s war, possibly because it’s always handy and easy to get. Laxter would know about that. What a swine the fellow must be to do that to a chap who fought with him in the war. He might as well have put a bomb in the engine as sugar in the tank.”

“We’ll remember it,” said Bertie, grimly.

“This business is beginning to take shape,” asserted Biggles. “We’ll get the chemists at the Yard to analyse this stuff in your handkerchief, Algy. They’ll know what it was. I’d better have a word with Gaskin. I wonder if he’s still in his office. Ginger, slip out to a ‘phone and find out. If he’s there ask him to wait. Say I’m sending something down to him.”

Ginger was soon back. “He’s there. He’ll wait,” he announced.

“Good,” rejoined Biggles. “Algy, take that carbon deposit to him for a lab. report. Say it’s urgent. I want you also to give him the number of that Daimler and say I’d like to know all there is to know about it. Finally, ask him to be good enough to meet me, bringing the reports with him, at the Ops Room, at Gatwick, tomorrow morning, as early as he can manage it. You can tell him that his aviation hunch was right on the beam. That should bring him along in a hurry. Now you, Bertie. It’s time we knew a little more about this rat Laxter. If that’s an assumed name you won’t be able to do anything about it, but if it is his real name, and it may be, get his service record from the Air Ministry. I’ll see you both at Gatwick in the morning. Okay. That’s all for now. Get on with it. We can talk some more tomorrow. Oh, and Bertie, you might take these photos with you. They are those we took this morning. Bring them to

Gatwick with you and we'll have a good look at them."

Algy and Bertie went off on their respective tasks.

"Where do we go next?" Ginger asked Biggles.

"I was thinking of looking in at the Barn to see who's about," answered Biggles. "If Swell Noble is at Gortons he won't be there."

"What's he doing at Gortons?"

"Maybe just lying doggo until the time comes to crack another crib. I could understand him going to Gortons afterwards, with the swag on him; but the fact that he's there already suggests that these jobs might be organized by Carlton, at Gortons. Norman and Noble are certainly well in with him, and there may be others. Carlton, with a partner in France, must be the head man of the show."

"And Laxter will get in touch with you when another jewel robbery has been pulled off."

"That's how I see it."

"And what are you going to do?"

"I shall go. But we'll talk about that later. Let's see what's happening at the Barn."

They went out, and boarding a bus made their way to the tavern.

As it was rather early there were not many customers present, but one of them was Norman, still drinking quietly by himself at the bar. The only other man known to be a crook was Brace, and he went out soon after they had entered.



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*See page 131*

"Feeling better?" Biggles asked Norman.

"I'm all right," growled Norman.

Biggles did not pursue the conversation. He ordered a drink for appearances' sake and took it over to their usual table.



“I wonder where that scallywag Brace went,” he murmured. “He’s usually here for the night. There doesn’t seem to be anything doing so I shan’t stay long.”

They sat there for perhaps half an hour, after which they went out, and having had a meal at one of the smaller inexpensive restaurants with which Soho abounds, went home.

After they had been in Biggles’ room for a little while he got up as if he had remembered something, and crossing to the chest of drawers opened the one in which he had put the envelope.

“We’ve had visitors,” he announced, quietly.

“You mean?”

“Somebody’s been at this envelope. I put it down carefully, in a different position from this. I noted the position exactly.”

“Laxter?”

“I wouldn’t think so. I doubt if he’d do a job like that himself. He’d get somebody else to do it, someone who’s used to housebreaking.”

“Dusty Brace? Remember how he went out when we walked into the Barn. He has a grudge against you, don’t forget.”

“I don’t see how it could have been him.”

“Why not?”

“Because as far as I know he didn’t know where we lived.”

“It wouldn’t have taken him long to find out.”

“But what interest would he have in the envelope or its contents?”

“I don’t say that was his reason for coming here. He may have been after money. Having seen you with that wad of two hundred pounds, even though you gave it to Norman, he may have thought you kept some money here.”

“I hope you’re right,” said Biggles, softly. “If somebody gave him our address, and sent him here on a definite errand, I can think of only one reason. Laxter may have been more interested in that envelope than he pretended. Well, there it is. There’s nothing we can do about it now. Thank goodness I took those photographs out with me. It all goes to show one can’t be too careful. It’s the little things that count. That’s where crooks so often slip up, and where we could slip, too, particularly while we’re off our course on this sort of work. But let’s get to bed. We look like having another busy day tomorrow.”

# CHAPTER XI

## NEWS FOR INSPECTOR GASKIN

THE following morning Biggles and Ginger were early in the Operations Room at the aerodrome, having driven down in their own car which they had picked up at the garage where it had been left: but it was nearly eleven o'clock before the party was complete— not that there was any great urgency about the meeting.

Algy was the first of the others to arrive. He had no news, except to say that Inspector Gaskin had promised to come along as soon as possible. He brought with him the air photographs of Gortons, and a study of these under a magnifying glass gave them something to do while they were waiting for Bertie, who had gone to the Air Ministry, and Gaskin. Actually, they yielded no information that was not already known, but, as Biggles remarked, they were likely to be useful if operations on the spot were projected.

Bertie came next, with the result of his enquiries at the Air Ministry. "Not much in the way of gen, old boy, but all we want to know," he reported. "Laxter's a wrong 'un. Served in the same squadron as Reverley for a time and was usually in and out of trouble, although nothing very serious. But think this one over. Five years ago he was court-martialled for making an unauthorized landing overseas, in a government aircraft, while serving on Home Establishment. The machine was a Tiger Moth. He was instructing at the time."

"What happened?"

"He got away with it. Said he was above the clouds, with no way of checking his drift, unaware that at six thousand there was a wind of fifty miles an hour. He landed to find out where he was, not having realized that he'd been blown across the channel. That was his explanation and it was accepted."

"H'm. A plausible tale," murmured Biggles. "I wonder what he was up to on that occasion. Why did he leave the Service?"

"He went out on his ear, having been found guilty, while acting as mess secretary, of pinching mess funds and faking officers' accounts to make his books balance. Reverley had then been out of the Service for some time, so he may not have known anything about that."

Biggles nodded. "We may be pretty sure he didn't know, or he'd have had no further truck with the fellow. I thought it might be something like that. No doubt Laxter now has a grudge against the R.A.F.. It's usually the people in the wrong who squeal the loudest when they're caught."

They were studying the photographs again, with Bertie pointing out the scene of his exploit, when Inspector Gaskin, pipe in mouth, strode in. "So I was right, eh," he said breezily.

"It begins to look very much like it," Biggles told him.

"You're on the track, eh?"

"Flat out on a warm scent that promises soon to be hot," stated Biggles. "I've brought you down here because, for one thing, no one is likely to see us together; and for another, I want you to know just how things stand at the moment. I may need your advice. I shall certainly want your help. Sit down. Did you get that carbon analysed?"

"Yes. What did you reckon was in it?"

"Sugar. At least, we had an idea it might be sugar."

"Quite right. No doubt about it."

"You know where the stuff came from?"

"Algy told me. He told me about this place Gortons and what happened at the crash."

"Then you must have realized that Reverley was murdered just as surely as if a gun or a knife had done the job."

"Yes, but there's a lot of difference."

"How?"

"With weapons you've something to look for. More often than not they provide the evidence. This sugar business leaves us in the air."

"It was murder. A pilot doesn't put sugar in his own tank."

"How are you going to prove who did put it in? Apparently when Reverley left his own aerodrome he didn't tell anyone where he was going, so you couldn't even prove he landed at Gortons. And if we could prove that it wouldn't help much. All we can prove is that the crash was probably caused by fire as a result of sugar being in the petrol."

"It must have been one of this bunch at Gortons. Remember, I saw Reverley with this chap Laxter."

"Sure. We know that. But which one was it? It's no use putting a gang of men in the box and saying one of 'em committed a murder. You've got to know which one of 'em did it, and be able to prove it."

"The tin, or whatever it was that held the sugar, may still be about, with fingerprints on it," suggested Ginger.

"So what? They'd say this was the sugar they used for making tea. Nothing strange about that. Everyone makes tea. No. It won't do. We know murderers who are walking about today, and they can cock a snoot at us because we can't *prove* what we know."

"Okay," said Biggles. "Let's leave that for the moment. If we can get 'em all in the box on another charge maybe one of 'em will rat on the others to save his skin."

"That's about your only chance," said Gaskin, scraping out the bowl of his pipe with a penknife. "The only charge you have at the moment is the technical one of running an unauthorised aero club without a licence."

"What about this Daimler?" queried Biggles. "Have you checked up on it?"

"Yes, and it doesn't get us far. It belongs to Mr. Eustace Carlton. The

licence and insurance are in his name. All straightforward on the face of it. I've been wondering who he can be. He may be a newcomer, but the fact that he knows these jewel thieves suggests he's been in that racket himself. I can think of only three men who it might be, and it's some time since I heard of any of 'em. Tell me what he looked like, Bertie."

Bertie described the man in detail. "He had a slight foreign accent," he concluded.

"Foreign accent, eh," murmured Gaskin pensively, filling his pipe with great deliberation. "Did you by any chance notice if his eyes weren't quite the same colour?"

"No."

"H'm. Feller about sixty, you say?"

"About that."

"Did he have a little scar on his chin?"

"Couldn't say. The beard would have covered it."

"Of course. Beard. None of the three I'm thinking of wore a beard last time I saw 'em. But that means nothing. Queer. I feel I ought to be able to place this Mister Carlton. He must have a police record somewhere or these crooks wouldn't flock round him." Gaskin drummed on the desk with his fingers as he searched his memory. "Can you think of anything else about him that might help us, Bertie?"

"I've just remembered something," answered Bertie. "His right hand looked as if it had been in the mangle."

Gaskin stiffened, staring. His fingers stopped drumming. "Say that again!"

"His right hand looked a bit of a mess."

Gaskin spoke with great deliberation. "You didn't happen to notice if the little finger, or most of it, was missing?"

"That's right, I did notice it," agreed Bertie.

"Face a bit grey... lot of lines on it. Baggy under the eyes. Thin. Cheek bones a bit on the high side. Cheeks sunken, as if he'd been sick."

"That describes the man I saw," confirmed Bertie.

"Well, strike me lucky!" exclaimed Gaskin. "It must be him. There can't be two men in the world so much alike, both jewel thieves. Well— well— well."

"You seem surprised about something," prompted Biggles.

"Surprised! That's putting it mildly. So our old friend the Count has turned up again. He certainly pulled a fast one this time."

"Any reason why he shouldn't turn up?"

"Plenty. He's dead and buried—or supposed to be. Died of a heart attack, they said."

"Who said?"

"The French police. They were hot on his trail and he tried to make a getaway into Italy by crossing the mountains. Had two guides with him. They came back, met the police and said the old man had collapsed and died of a

heart attack. That sounded reasonable because it was known he had a weak heart. We were all very pleased about it, because he'd been a headache for years. So all this time we've been fooling ourselves. Well— well. I don't know."

"Who is this smart guy?" questioned Biggles. "You seem to know him."

"Know him? He's known to the police over half Europe, and the United States. One of the slickest jewel thieves of all time—anyway, until a detonator went off in his hand as he was about to blow a safe. That cramped his style a bit."

"What's his nationality?"

"I don't think anyone really knows. He was always on the move. California, the Riviera, Switzerland, England, they were all the same to him. Speaks all the lingoes like a native."

"Do you want him for anything?"

"No. I thought we had him once, but he slipped through our fingers on a fake alibi. He's wanted on the Continent. That'd mean extradition. I'd rather pick him up here on this new racket. That'd be a feather in our cap. It looks as if, being unable to do jobs himself on account of that dud hand, he's organized others to do them for him. He receives the swag and sells it to another receiver on the Continent. Strike me pink! This is an eye-opener and no mistake."

"Well, let's see if we can open the Count's eyes," suggested Biggles. "The fact that he has Swell Noble staying with him can only mean there's another jewel robbery on the cards. That would account for Laxter's hurry to find a pilot. He wants to be able to shift the swag across the Channel as soon as it's brought in. With Gortons the headquarters of the gang it looks as if the Count is actually planning these robberies himself."

"That's more than likely. He's had a lifetime of experience."

"Norman must be on his staff, too. So was Stony Stoneways."

"It all points that way. Stony must have been on his way to Gortons when we nabbed him. Good job he didn't get there. What a hideout! We'd never have found him."

"Laxter might have flown him out of the country, if it comes to that," said Biggles.

Gaskin felt for his tobacco pouch. "Well, where do we go from here. You tell me. I'll do whatever you say."

"This is the position," stated Biggles. "I'm likely to be invited to Gortons at any time, although I don't think that'll happen until there's a parcel of gems to be flown somewhere."

"And you'll go to Gortons?"

"Of course."

Gaskin frowned. "I don't like the idea of you going into that house. If that bunch rumbled you you'd never get out of it alive. They'd see to that. They'd have to. You've seen by what they did to Reverley how they handle people who know too much."

Biggles smiled. "With a chance of collecting all these eggs in one basket I'm not likely to turn down the job on that account. Poor Reverley wasn't prepared for trouble. I would be."

"And, by thunder! You'd have to be," declared Gaskin.

"I shall let you know when I'm going to Gortons, so you'll be standing by to get me out should I get in a jam."

"How shall I know if you're in a jam?"

Biggles reached for a cigarette. "I shall have to leave that to you."

"That's all very well," growled Gaskin. "If I jump in too early the scheme will go off at half cock. If I'm too late...."

"You'll be too late," interposed Biggles. "That's all there is to it. It's a chance we shall have to take."

"I don't like it."

"Let's leave it like this," decided Biggles. "For the moment we do nothing. Let the other side make the next move. I'll let you have these photos of Gortons so that you can get the layout of the place in your mind. When I hear from Laxter I shall assume there is some flying to be done. In other words, there will be the proceeds of another robbery to be flown to France. As I'm not supposed to know of the existence of Gortons Laxter will either send a car to London for me or arrange for the Daimler to meet me at Hertford North station."

"So we're to wait for another robbery."

"That's how I work it out. If you raided Gortons before that you wouldn't find anything there. You may be sure they don't keep stuff there longer than is necessary."

"And you'll go to Gortons when they send for you?"

"Of course. That's what I've been playing for all along."

"Okay. So you go to Gortons. Then what?"

"What happens next will depend on what they want me to do. If I'm asked to fly solo to deliver a parcel I could land at the nearest aerodrome, let you know what I've got, and you could do what you liked about it."

The Inspector sucked on his pipe. "I can't see them handing you a parcel of jewels. It's more likely you'd have to fly somebody, either Carlton himself or a go-between."

"That would make things a little more complicated, because, for one thing, I might not be told where I was to go until I was in the air. But I should be able to handle the situation."

Bertie stepped in. "The man you fly, or the man waiting for you over the other side, may be in touch with Gortons by radio. Don't forget what I told you about that out-size wireless aerial."

"Listen, what's wrong with this," resumed Gaskin. "As soon as you get a call from Laxter you 'phone me, or let me know somehow. When I know you're inside I'll put a cordon round the place and grab everyone there. If the swag is there, and we reckon they won't send for you till it is, that'll be all the

evidence we need for a conviction.”

“There’s one snag about that.”

“What is it?”

“You’ll only be able to charge them with robbery or receiving.”

“Well?”

“I want to nail them for the murder of Reverley. I don’t feel like letting them get away with that. To take a bag of jewels from a woman, who probably has more money than sense anyway, is one thing. To cut off a decent man’s life, for no other reason than he won’t turn crook, is another.”

“I’ve already told you that you’ve no hope of getting ‘em for murder unless one of ‘em squeals,” asserted the Inspector, impatiently. “The thing’s done and they’re not likely to repeat it—unless they try it on you.”

“I can’t see them burning their own machine. Reverley was flying his own, don’t forget. Aeroplanes are expensive.”

“And if you’re thinking of raiding the place, Inspector, don’t forget those bally dogs,” put in Bertie.

“I won’t,” promised Gaskin, grimly.

They continued to discuss the matter for some time, and at the end it was left like this. When Biggles heard that he was wanted he would let the others know. Should there be a jewel robbery they would be on the alert. Gaskin would take his men to Gortons and surround the place. The signal for them to close in and arrest everyone would be the starting of the aero engine, for that could be taken to mean that Biggles either had a parcel of jewels in his pocket, or was in the company of a man who had. Meanwhile the Inspector would be standing by. Algy and Bertie would remain either at the flat, or, during the daytime, at the Air Police office at the Yard.

Biggles arranged to meet them that evening at seven o’clock sharp at the usual rendezvous at Victoria station to exchange news and views should there be any developments.

With that decision the conference came to an end and they went their different ways, Biggles and Ginger returning to the hotel in case Laxter should be trying to get in touch with them.

## CHAPTER XII

### THE TRAP

THAT the plan did not work out as anticipated may have been due to any one of several reasons. It may be that Biggles, as a result of talking so much about it, had taken it for granted that his services would not be required until a jewel robbery had been committed. When this happened he would, of course, know about it, and that would be the signal for the plan to move into operation, the warning to be prepared to go to Gortons.

Again, and this was a weak point in the scheme although it might be justified, he did not for a moment suppose that Laxter would turn up at the hotel without letting him know he was coming, if for no other reason than to ascertain that he was at home. As Biggles had actually told the man, he could not be expected to stay indoors all the time. In other words, Biggles took it as a foregone conclusion that when Laxter was ready he would call him on the telephone to say he was on his way to Gillingham Street, or, more likely, arrange to meet him either in London or at Hertford North station, as had been the case with Norman when he had gone to Gortons.

None of these things happened.

At five minutes to seven Biggles was reaching for his hat to walk the short distance to Victoria, to meet Algy and Bertie as arranged, when Ginger, happening to look out of the window, startled him with the information that the Daimler was pulling up outside the door.

"I hope he's not expecting me to go with him now," was all he had time to say before a tap came on the door and Laxter walked in.

"Okay," said Laxter crisply. "We're ready."

"You may be, but I'm not," protested Biggles. "Why didn't you let me know you were coming?"

"There wasn't time."

"You were lucky to catch us in," rejoined Biggles. "Another couple of minutes and we would have been out."

"I took a chance on it," said Laxter, casually. "If you hadn't been here I'd have looked for you at the Barn."

"What makes you think I go to the Barn?"

"A little bird whispered in my ear. That's your usual hang-out, isn't it? But come on. Why argue about it? The Boss wants to have a word with you."

"Now?"

"Sure."

"Isn't it time you told me who the Boss—"

"You'll see, presently."

"Where are we going?"

"You'll see that, too."



“How do we get there?”

“I have a car outside.”

“Are you bringing me back tonight?”

“No. Stop asking questions. You’ll know all the answers later on.”

“You’ll have to give me a minute to put a few things in a bag.”

“You won’t need much.”

“I wasn’t thinking of bringing a trunk,” said Biggles, curtly, “but I’m not going away for the night without my small kit. Had you let me know you were coming I’d have been ready and waiting.”

Long before this conversation had ended Ginger had perceived that their plan was in danger of going to pieces at the outset through their failure to make provision for the circumstances that had arisen. It was based on the assumption that Algy and Gaskin would know exactly when Biggles had gone to Gortons. It was now clear that short of taking a firm stand, which might arouse Laxter’s suspicions, they would be given no opportunity of letting the others know they had gone. Laxter had turned up unexpectedly, apparently without waiting for a jewel robbery, and this was the result.

“What about my friend here?” asked Biggles, indicating Ginger.

“He’d better come along with us. Naturally, you’ll want to keep together, apart from which we may find a job for him. There’s plenty of room where we’re going.”

Ginger was not deceived by this. Laxter, obviously wanted to keep them together. Why? He could only conclude that they preferred to have him where they could see him rather than go alone to the Barn where he might do some indiscreet talking. It may seem odd that the true reason did not occur to him, but the fact remains, it did not. Anyway, as Biggles said no more about it, presumably being unwilling to start an argument, he made no demur and put his small kit in his bag. He had to go to his own room to do this, and for a moment he had an idea of going to the ‘phone at the bottom of the stairs, risky though it was. But when he looked out into the corridor Laxter was standing at the door of Biggles’ room. Whether he had taken up this position to keep an eye on him, or merely by accident, Ginger did not know; but it put an end to the ‘phone call idea. Laxter might not prevent him going to the ‘phone, but he would hear every word he said.

“Come on,” said Laxter impatiently. “What are you fiddling with? I don’t want to hang about here half the night.”

“All right, I’m ready,” announced Biggles. “What’s all the hurry?” he added irritably.

Laxter did not answer.

They went downstairs and took their places in the back seat of the Daimler, Laxter sitting next to the chauffeur. The car moved off. Ginger looked at his watch. It was nearly twenty past seven. Algy and Bertie, he reflected, would no doubt be wondering why they were late.

It was soon plain from the route taken by the car that they were bound for

Gortons, for it took the shortest way to the Great North Road. This it followed as far as Hatfield where, turning right on to the Hertford road, any doubt about its destination was settled.

It was a strange, uneasy ride. Laxter didn't say a word. Biggles made only one attempt to start a conversation, asking Laxter why he was making such a mystery of the trip. Laxter said something about there being plenty of time for talking presently, and that was that.

If there was such a mystery about it, pondered Ginger, why were they allowed to see where they were going? But again he did not guess the answer. The thought dominant in his mind was, they were out on their own, far from the reach of help should they need it. The others would miss them, of course. But would they guess where they had gone, bearing in mind that there had been no jewel robbery. The chances were, he reflected, they would wait for a 'phone call, not daring to go far unless one came through.

Actually, Ginger was not particularly alarmed. What worried him was, if there should be a jewel robbery that night he and Biggles would have to handle the situation single-handed since the others would not be there. As Gaskin did not know they were at Gortons there would be no cordon round the place, as had been arranged.

Having passed through Waterford the car turned up the lane, and a few minutes later was gliding between the rhododendrons to Gortons House. It stopped at the front door. Laxter jumped out. "Here we are," he said cheerfully.

There was a tone of something like relief in his voice that Ginger did not like.

The car moved away. Laxter rang the bell. The door was opened.

"Come in," said Laxter, standing aside for them to enter.

After leaving their hats on the hall stand he took the lead and they followed him to a door at the end of the hall. He pushed it open and ushered them in. "Meet the Boss," he said, in a mocking, sardonic tone of voice, closing the door behind them.

Seated in an arm chair by the fireplace was the bearded man Bertie had described, the man who called himself Carlton, but who was known to Gaskin as the Count.

He greeted them with a smile. "Come in, Inspector Bigglesworth," he said suavely. "We are delighted to see you. As you will observe, we have arranged a little party for the occasion."

Ginger felt a small hard object being pressed into the small of his back. He didn't look round, knowing what it was, for Laxter, standing behind Biggles was holding a gun against his back. In the mirror over the fireplace Ginger saw that his own guard was Dusty Brace, the pickpocket.

His eyes went on round the room. It was well furnished, partly as a sitting room and partly as a library. Standing around at intervals, grim and unsmiling, were Swell Noble, Gus Norman, Darkie Brown and two men whom Gaskin

had said were in the same smash and grab team—he had forgotten their names. These, then, with Laxter and Dusty Brace, were the reception committee. What a nice haul they would have made for Gaskin, reflected Ginger sadly, as he felt his automatic being taken from his pocket. Biggles was losing his in the same way. He made no protest, for in the circumstances resistance was obviously futile.

“Well, what have you to say?” prompted the Count.

“Say? Nothing—except that I never saw a better collection of gaol-fodder under one roof. You can talk if you like, but I need hardly warn you that anything you say may be used as evidence against you.”

“Thank you for the warning but it was quite unnecessary,” returned the Count, selecting with great care a cigar from a box. “Then you’re not denying that you’re an amateur detective employed by Scotland Yard?”

Biggles looked pained. “You do me less than justice. I think I can by this time claim to be a professional.”

“I’m afraid you haven’t behaved like one on this occasion,” said the Count reprovingly. “But it is immaterial. I want you to know that you have put me to great trouble, not to say expense.”

“That’s capital,” answered Biggles. “I’m glad I’ve succeeded in one respect. What you have suffered so far is merely an earnest of what is to come.”

“Don’t flatter yourself, my optimistic friend, for there you will be disappointed,” said the Count, with an edge on his voice. “I don’t think you can quite have grasped the situation. All chance of what you hope for is past. Why do you think I have brought you here?”

“I’m waiting for you to tell me.”

“With pleasure, for by this time tomorrow I shall be far away, and all that will remain of this house will be a heap of cinders. I deplore the necessity, but you will be among the cinders.”

“If you’re going to make a bonfire of this house I understand what you mean about my putting you to some expense,” said Biggles. “It seems a pity to spoil all this good furniture, which must have cost you a lot of money.”

“That is of no importance,” returned the Count. “It isn’t mine. You see, I have only rented the house, furnished. But tell me this, to satisfy my curiosity. I like to profit from my mistakes and I fear I must have made one. What caused you to suspect that my little aero club was not entirely what it pretended to be?”

“It’s a long story, but it all started with a little piece of green glass,” said Biggles. “Now tell me, what gave you the idea that I wasn’t what I pretended to be?”

“That was quite simple. I couldn’t associate the name Biggles with Walls, so I made a few inquiries, which were confirmed when my observant assistant, Mr. Laxter, saw you carrying an envelope expressly produced for Her Majesty’s Service.”

“That was careless of me,” admitted Biggles.

“It would have come to the same thing in the end,” asserted the Count. “It seems that that fortuitous meeting of yours with Laxter and Reverley at the hotel near Hertford station served two purposes. As a result of Reverley’s ill-advised remarks I learned your name and you learned of my club. It was a great pity for all concerned.”

“That was hardly sufficient reason for you to murder Reverley,” said Biggles, coldly.

The Count’s eyebrows went up. “Ah! So you worked that out. Very clever of you. It was Laxter’s idea and I thought it was a very good one. Frankly, I could see no alternative. Reverley was altogether too talkative. That was his mistake. You have been too inquisitive. That was yours. There is now no doubt in your mind as to why I had you brought here?”

“In view of the nature of this conversation, no doubt at all. But don’t count your chickens too soon. It’s easy to point out other people’s mistakes as you have done, but not so easy to see your own.”

The Count smiled. “What is mine?”

“The commonest of all. Vanity. Look at this set-up. You’ve called your gang together for no other purpose than to show them what a clever fellow you are. Mind you don’t slip up.”

“There you are quite wrong,” said the Count imperturbably. “I called them together for quite another reason. They will be my operatives in a final coup, in this country, for when I leave it with its miserable climate I shall not go with empty pockets, you may be sure of that. I’m almost sorry that you will know nothing of it, but for the peace of mind of everyone concerned it cannot be otherwise. When, tomorrow evening, the time comes for me to depart, my friends will disperse and this house will be burnt to the ground. You will of course be in it. With the nearest fire brigade some miles away at Hertford there should not be much left by the time it gets here. A simple plan, but effective, I think you will agree. I am a believer in simplicity. The more complicated the plan the more chance there is of it going wrong. Is there anything more you would like to say?”

“Nothing at all. You have told me all I wanted to know.”

“In that case there is no point in prolonging this exchange of compliments, so I will bid you goodnight.” The Count made a signal of dismissal.

Covered by guns Biggles and Ginger were escorted to the rear of the house. A door was opened. “Down you go,” ordered Laxter. “Mind the steps,” he added, with a sneer.

Feeling his way Ginger followed Biggles into what was evidently the wine cellar of the house.

The door at the top of the steps was closed. A key turned in the lock.

Biggles flicked on his petrol lighter and in the feeble illumination it provided they looked around.

Ginger saw they were in fact in the wine cellar, for there were the usual

bins for holding bottles, some still carrying a few. Several broken wine cases were stacked against the wall. There was no window, nor any other contact with the outside. Following Biggles' example Ginger stacked two cases to make a seat.

Biggles closed his lighter, no doubt to save the fuel. "Well—well," he said calmly. "So we set a trap and then step into it ourselves with both feet. I don't know if you've noticed it but all through history men have been doing that, even the really clever ones. It's so easy. You sit down and in making your plan allow, as you think, for every contingency that might arise. And what happens? The one thing you forgot turns up. It's almost as if Fate deliberately takes the mickey out of you, just to show you that you're not as smart as you thought you were."

"I can't see that you're to blame for this," protested Ginger.

"I can," answered Biggles. "This situation was on the boards— obviously, since it has happened— and I should have made provision for it. It would have been so simple. I had only to tell Gaskin and the others that if we were missing they'd find us here. I forgot to do it and this is the result."

"They'll guess it," asserted Ginger, confidently.

"Yes—but when? And even if we are missed it's hardly likely they'll come barging in here for fear of upsetting my plan. They couldn't be expected to visualize a situation such as this."

"You think the Count means what he said?"

"I haven't the slightest doubt about it. As he claimed, it's simple and effective. The stage is all set. What's going to happen is plain. That bunch of crooks upstairs will pull off another big jewel job— probably two; a smash and grab raid and a cat-burglary. They'll bring the loot here. The Count will pay them, and with Laxter at the joystick fly to France, leaving the gang to disperse to their respective hideouts. My big blunder, of course, was to assume that I wouldn't be sent for until a jewel robbery provided something to be flown across the Channel. My plan rested on that. It's easy to see faults afterwards, but I should have made provision for Laxter's arrival at the hotel, with a car to take us away, without giving us time to contact the others or leave a message. I felt sure he would 'phone me first, to tell me he was coming, and ask me to be ready. The fact that he did what he did should have made me suspicious of his real intentions. There were other pointers, too."

"Such as?"

"His insistence on you coming with me."

"I thought that was queer at the time. I couldn't imagine why he wanted me."

"The answer stuck out a mile. He wasn't leaving you behind to tell anyone that he'd called and that I'd gone off with him. I should have guessed from that we'd been rumbled."

"And if you had, if I know you, you'd still have come here," averred Ginger.

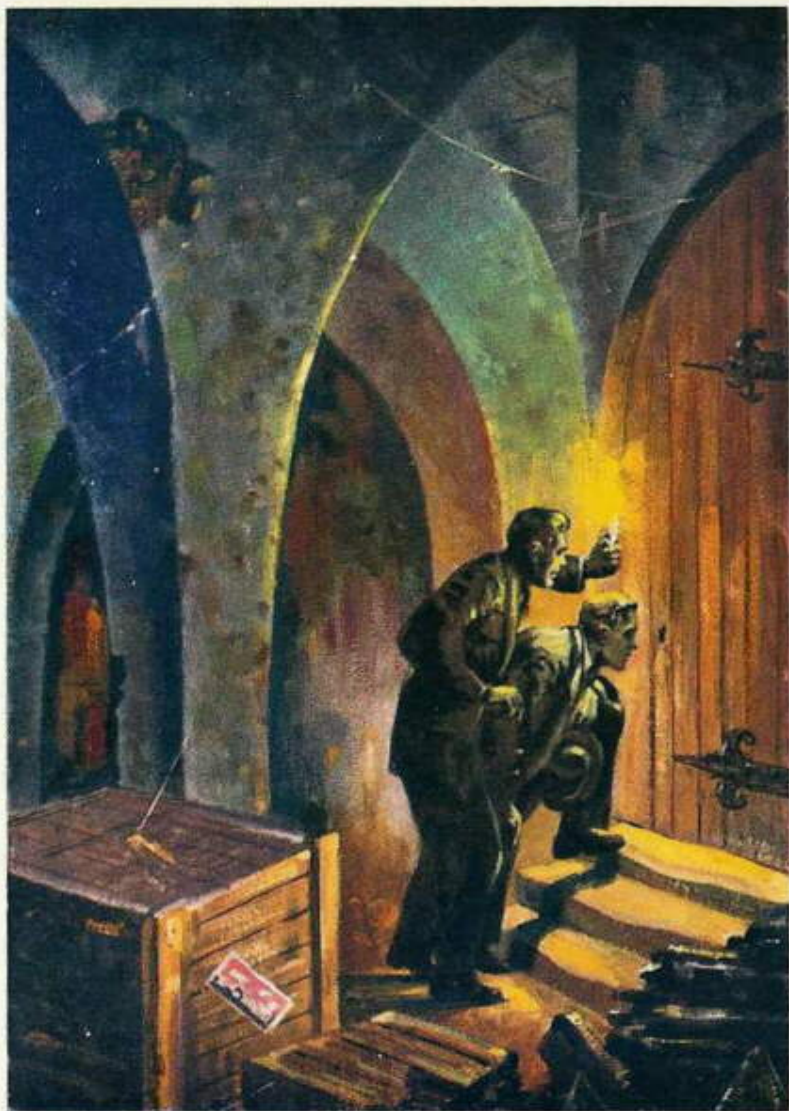
“Possibly. But I wouldn’t have been such a fool as to come without letting the others know. Whether Laxter liked it or not I’d have made some excuse for leaving him, or for one of us to leave him, to let the others know what was cooking. We’d got this outfit just about buttoned up without sticking our necks out like this. But it’s no use talking about that now. We’re here, so we’d better decide what we’re going to do about it. Not that I think there’s much we can do. The Count would hardly be so dumb as to put us in a place from which there was the slightest chance of getting out. Let’s have a look.”

In the flickering flame of Biggles’ lighter the prison was explored, and it needed only a minute to confirm Biggles’ opinion. The walls were plain solid brickwork, whitewashed. There was not even a ventilator.

Said Biggles: “That’s that. There’s only one way of getting out of this hole and that’s through the door.”

They went up the short flight of stone steps and examined it. It was, of course, of wood, but a brief examination revealed that it had been built and put there in the days before cheapness in house construction was the main consideration. It was of soft wood— deal, Biggles thought— as would be expected of an unimportant door; but it was thicker than a modern door would be likely to be. The lock, and the latch, were of iron, large and old-fashioned, and intended for a long life.

Biggles put an eye to the keyhole. “They’ve left the key in the lock,” he observed.



Biggles put an eye to the keyhole.

*See page 156*

“If you’re thinking of the old trick of pushing it out so that it falls on a sheet of paper which can then be pulled back under the door, it won’t work,” said Ginger, bitterly. “The door fits absolutely flush and the key’s a big one. I made a point of looking at it. We shouldn’t have let them put us in here.”

“How would you have prevented it?” inquired Biggles, with faint sarcasm.

“We should have fought it out upstairs.”

“In which case you would by this time be lying on the floor with several holes in you. Don’t suppose I didn’t consider it. But we hadn’t a hope. There were eight of them, probably all armed with a weapon of some sort. Laxter, having committed one murder, had nothing to lose by doing another. As it is we’re still alive, and that suits me much better. While you’re on your feet anything can happen. When you’re dead it doesn’t matter what happens. Let’s have a look at this door.”

He examined it closely.

“We could cut a hole through a panel big enough to put an arm through,” he opined. “Unfortunately it would take best part of a week with the only tools we have available.”

“Tools?”

“A penknife and broken glass. You can do quite a lot with the neck or the base of a broken bottle—if you have unlimited time, which we haven’t, although we have plenty of bottles. Another snag about that is, anyone passing the door would hear what was going on.”

“We’ve nothing to lose by that,” declared Ginger. “If anyone opens the door while I’m working on it he’ll get a bottle on his nut,” he added, vindictively. “I’d rather be doing something than just sitting down waiting for tomorrow.”

“Go ahead,” invited Biggles. “Be careful how you break a bottle. This is no time to gash your hand open.”

“You make the mark on the door where you think is the best place,” requested Ginger.

Biggles did so. “We shall have to work in the dark,” he said. “At this rate my lighter will soon pack up.”

Ginger set to work. He worked non-stop for an hour, at the end of which time, as investigation showed, he had done no more than make a deep scratch.

“I’m afraid you’re right,” he said disgustedly. “It’s no use. The job would take as many days as we have hours.”

“I thought you’d come to that conclusion,” said Biggles, evenly.

“We’ll have a bash at ‘em when they open the door,” decided Ginger.

“You mean *if* they open the door,” corrected Biggles. “Personally, I don’t think they will. After all, if they intend setting the house on fire why should they?”

Silence fell.



## CHAPTER XIII

### NEW MOVES

HAD Biggles and Ginger but known it, they would have derived some comfort from the fact that Algy and Bertie knew where they were. At least, they had good reason to think they did. And it came about in a manner that was perfectly natural.

They kept the appointment which Biggles had arranged for seven o'clock in the Victoria refreshment room. They arrived in a hurry dead on time, having been held up in the usual traffic jam, for they knew what Biggles was for punctuality. He hated to be kept waiting himself, and for that reason saw to it that he did not keep others waiting. They knew that should they be so much as two minutes late they would be greeted with a frown. It was this insistence on punctuality that was directly responsible for the events that were to follow.

Looking round, they were surprised to find that neither Biggles nor Ginger had arrived; for Biggles was far more likely to be five minutes early than one minute late. All they could do was sit down and watch the door.

When five minutes had passed and there was still no sign of them Algy remarked: "This isn't like Biggles. Something must have gone wrong. He was only going to wait at the hotel in case Laxter should try to contact him. He didn't say anything about doing anything else."

Another five minutes elapsed. "Could he have forgotten?" said Bertie.

"Don't talk nonsense," expostulated Algy. "Would he be likely to forget? Have you ever known him to forget a date? Something's happened or he'd have been here when we arrived."

"Had he decided to do something that was likely to make him late I would have thought he'd have found some way of letting us know," opined Bertie.

"How could he let us know?"

"He might have left a message at the hotel, knowing that's where we'd make for if he didn't show up."

"Yes, he might have done that," conceded Algy.

"Shall I slip round?"

"We'll give him a few more minutes. There's no reason to get in a flap."

More minutes idled past. Algy looked again at the clock. "Quarter past seven," he said, frowning. "It begins to look as if he isn't coming at all. Bertie, I think you'd better trot round to the hotel to see if there's a message. It won't take you five minutes. I'll wait here in case they come."

"Okay, laddie." Bertie went off.

It wasn't long before he was back.

"Have you been to the hotel in that time?" asked Algy, looking astonished, without waiting for Bertie to speak.

"I didn't get as far as the hotel," replied Bertie. "It wasn't necessary. I've seen them. Shook me, too, I don't mind telling you."

"You've *seen* them! Where?"

"They were in the Daimler. With the bloke who I imagine is Laxter. He was sitting in the front seat with the chauffeur with Biggles and Ginger behind."

Algy stared. "What happened, exactly?"

"I'd got to the corner of Gillingham Street when a black Daimler came round slowly into the main road. Naturally, as the car was a Daimler, I had a dekkko at the number plate. It was the one. I looked in the car, and there were Biggles and Ginger."

"Did they look as though they were being forced to go?"

"Not in the least. The car was going so slowly that they could have jumped out had they wanted to."

"Did they see you?"

"I don't think so. They were looking straight ahead as if to see which way they were going. A queer do, don't you think?"

"Too thundering queer for my liking."

"What do you make of it, laddie?"

Algy thought for a moment or two. "I don't know quite what to make of it. But I have an uncomfortable feeling that this has thrown the spanner in the works."

"Biggles knew we were waiting here. Why didn't he let us know?"

"That's easy to answer. Quite obviously he wasn't given an opportunity. What I don't understand is this. There has been no jewel robbery yet they've fetched him. Why? Laxter came himself, in the car. He couldn't have 'phoned to say he was coming or Biggles would have found some way of letting us know he wouldn't be here. Laxter must have rolled up without warning and caught him unprepared. Why all the hurry if there has been no jewel robbery?"

"It may be that Laxter has taken him to Gortons merely for an interview with the big boss—this Count fellow."

Algy nodded. "That could be the answer. If so, Laxter will no doubt bring him back. Biggles wouldn't let slip any opportunity of meeting the Count. All the same, I don't like the look of it. What happens if Laxter doesn't bring him back?"

Bertie shrugged. "Don't ask me, old boy. All I know is, Biggles didn't reckon on going to Gortons until there was some reason for him to go—another jewel robbery, for instance. Well, he's gone, so it looks as if the plan he arranged with Gaskin has gone adrift."

"I'm afraid you're right."

"What are we going to do about it? Follow them to Gortons?"

"I don't know, and that's a fact," replied Algy. "If we go to Gortons we might get in the way and make a mess of things. What could we do if we did

go to Gortons, anyway? Sit and stare at the house?"

"We should hear a machine if it took off."

"We might sit there for days before that happened. I feel inclined to get Gaskin's opinion of this. He'll have to know, anyhow, in view of what he was going to do." Algy got up.

"Are you going to 'phone Gaskin's office to find out if he's still there?"

"No. We can be there just as quickly. We might just catch him. Come on."

They took a cab from the rank and arrived at the Inspector's office as he was preparing to leave.

"Hello, you two, what's gone wrong?" he queried, shrewdly.

"Biggles and Ginger are on their way to Gortons in the Daimler."

"How did that happen?"

Algy explained the situation. "Has there been a jewel robbery?" he concluded.

"If there has it wasn't in my division. I haven't heard of one anywhere else. But it begins to look as if there might soon be one or they wouldn't have taken Biggles down there—unless...."

"Unless what?"

"Unless they've rumbled who he is."

Algy looked aghast. "I didn't think of that. Even so, what about it? I'd have thought that would be the last place they'd take him if they knew who he was."

"It'd be a good place to keep him out of the way."

"They wouldn't dare—"

"Wouldn't they? You haven't forgotten Reverley. He knew too much."

"Then what do you suggest we do?"

Gaskin sat down and began filling his pipe. "Nothing in a hurry," he advised. "There is this about it. I don't think the Count can know about you two. Laxter doesn't know that you saw him leave Gillingham Street with Biggles and Ginger in his car. And none of 'em can know that I'm in this, too. So even if they've found out who Biggles really is, by taking him away they'll think they're sitting pretty."

"But if they think that they're liable to do anything," protested Algy.

"If they think they're safe they're more likely to carry on with their own schemes and maybe get a bit careless. I can tell you this. Gus Norman has gone to Hertford. So has Darkie Brown and his team. Dusty Brace isn't at his usual haunts. I know the signs. All this is working up to something."

"How do you know these crooks have gone there?"

The Inspector smiled sadly. "On my job the first thing you have to do is grow a few extra pairs of eyes. Mine have been on this bunch ever since Biggles took over."

"Are you still watching them?"

"Too true I am. I've a man planted behind the hedge opposite the Gortons drive. He has a walkie-talkie radio. While I hear nothing from him I shall

know this gathering of crooks is still in the house. The moment they leave I shall also know about it.”

“And if they leave you’ll reckon they’ve gone out on a job?”

“That’s it.”

“This man of yours will know if Biggles and Ginger do actually arrive at Gortons,” put in Bertie.

“I wouldn’t swear to that. If they arrive in daylight, yes, but maybe not if it’s after dark. I knew the Daimler had gone out with Laxter but I haven’t heard anything since. I shall know when the Daimler comes back.”

“Are you going to grab these crooks when they go out?” asked Algy.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“It’s no use picking ‘em up till they’ve done something. Besides, it might not be possible. These lads are wonders at losing themselves in the back doubles, as they call the side streets. That wasn’t the idea, anyway. The scheme was to let ‘em do the job, wait for ‘em to go back to Gortons with the swag and then collect the whole bunch, which would then include the Count, who’s the man I really want, the fence who has been giving me sleepless nights. If I arrest the others in London, and caught them with the stuff on them, that would leave the Count in the clear. I couldn’t pin anything on him unless one of the crooks squealed, and I wouldn’t care to rely on that. No. I want the Count with the stuff in his possession, either in the house, in his pocket or in the plane. That’s how Biggles understands it, so he’ll stick to the scheme as long as it’s possible. If that plane tries to leave we’ll jump it when the engine starts, whether he’s in it or not.”

“What if the plane doesn’t leave?”

“Then we’ll take a chance and close in on the house.” The Inspector looked up as a messenger walked in. “They may have started,” he said, reaching for the message slip. “No,” he corrected himself. “This is to say the Daimler has returned to Gortons with some passengers. We know who they are.”

“Biggles and Ginger.”

“Who else? They’ve just about had time to get there. Well, now. What do you want to do?”

“I’m prepared to do whatever you think’s best, but I must say I’m worried about Biggles.”

“Do you think you’d do any good by tearing off to Gortons and setting the place buzzing, bearing in mind that the thing might be working up to the sort of showdown Biggles planned?”

“I can see we might do more harm than good,” conceded Algy.

“That’s what I think,” returned the Inspector. “I’ll tell you my idea. If any of the gang leave Gortons I shall know it. Let’s leave things as they are until that happens. When it does, we’ll go down quietly with enough men to surround the place.”

“That could happen at any moment.”

“Of course it could. But if nobody leaves the house this side of midnight I’d say that nothing’s going to happen tonight.”

“Why do you think that?”

“I know how these beauties work. After midnight the roads are pretty clear and they don’t like that, because they know that on an open road the Flying Squad cars are faster than they are. They’d rather have some traffic to hide ‘em in the back doubles.”

“All right,” agreed Algy. “Are you going to stay here to see if any messages come in?”

“After what you’ve told me, yes. I shall stay until after midnight, anyway. I’ve plenty to do—alert the Flying Squad and detail some men to stand by in fast cars in case we have to move in a hurry.”

“And if nothing happens tonight can I take it that you’ve no objection to me and Bertie making our own way to Gortons tomorrow to keep an eye on things—on the hangar at any rate, to see if it shows signs of activity?”

“Don’t let ‘em see you. And don’t forget those dogs.”

“We’ll take care of that,” promised Algy. “We’ll find a hideout in the wood, probably in a tree.”

“Please yourselves. But don’t forget these men are dangerous, or that Dusty Brace carries knuckle-dusters. They can make a terrible mess of a man’s jaw.”

“If he tries to get close enough to me to use them he’ll be sorry,” declared Bertie. “I’ve no time for thugs who play that game.”

“In the meantime,” went on Algy, “do you mind if we stay here with you in case the balloon goes up tonight?”

“Make yourselves at home,” invited the Inspector. “Don’t worry too much. Nobody’s been murdered yet or that bunch wouldn’t still be there. Not on your life. If they’re scared of anything it’s that. Take it from me, I know ‘em. If the Count has any ideas of that sort it’ll be the last thing he does before he flits.”

“That won’t help Biggles,” muttered Algy.

“It’s a chance we all have to take,” said Gaskin soberly. “Biggles knows that as well as I do, and that was the chance he took when he went to Gortons. Now if you’ll excuse me I’ll get busy.” The Inspector went out, leaving Algy and Bertie alone.

For a long time they talked of the situation that had arisen, examining it from every possible angle, without drawing any fresh conclusions. From time to time Inspector Gaskin looked in to ascertain if there were any messages, but there was none.

Finally, just after midnight, he announced that he was going home. “If they haven’t left Gortons, and they haven’t or I’d know about it, they won’t be coming out tonight,” he announced confidently. “We’re all set if anything should happen, so if anything should turn up all you have to do is call me and I’ll be along in a few minutes. I have to get some sleep when I can, which

means when things are quiet. If you're not here in the morning when I come in I shall reckon you're somewhere near Gortons."

"That's it," confirmed Algy.

Gaskin put on his bowler and departed.

Algy and Bertie settled down to their vigil, Algy remarking that he was not in the mood to sleep, anyway.

The night wore on. After a while, however, they took it in turns to sleep. The telephone remained silent. No radio messages were brought in.

At six o'clock, with the traffic beginning to move outside, Algy yawned, stretched and got up. "Let's get mobile," he said wearily. "This sort of waiting to no purpose kills me."

"What's the drill?" asked Bertie.

"We'll slip home for some breakfast, a bath and a shave, and then waffle down to Gortons," decided Algy. "And as we're likely to be there all day, and maybe all night, we'd better put some sandwiches in our pockets," he added. "We'll leave word for Gaskin to say we've gone on."

"As you say, old boy," agreed Bertie.

## CHAPTER XIV

### WEARY WORK

IT was nearly ten o'clock when Algy and Bertie cruised in their car into the quiet county town of Hertford. Without stopping they went on to Waterford, and deciding that it would look odd to abandon the car by the side of the road—it was obviously out of the question to leave it in the narrow lane that led to Gortons—parked it under the big tree outside the village cafe. From there they proceeded on foot.

It was another perfect spring day, with the sun hard at work in a sky of cloudless blue. Birds sang. Rooks drifted lazily overhead. An occasional car or tradesman's van passed them on the road. A cowman took his herd across to its pasture. Apart from these innocent wayfarers they appeared to have this corner of rural England to themselves.

They did not take the lane that led to Gortons but went on past it, the main reason being the risk, however slight, of meeting the Daimler with someone in it who would remember seeing one of them before and wonder what he was doing. Laxter, for instance, would certainly remember Algy. He had seen him, and spoken with him, at the crash. The chauffeur must have seen Algy at the same time. Bertie had been seen by most of the people at Gortons when he had been treed by the Alsadans. Wherefore they went on a little way. Later, they left the road, and following the hedgerows made for the far end of the landing ground with the object of approaching the hangar from inside the wood, from the point farthest from the house.

They were agreed that it would be better to watch the hangar than the house itself, for if Biggles and Ginger were still there, and free to move about, they would, without the slightest doubt, walk along to the hangar to inspect the aircraft, if not to test it. If they were not free to move about it was hard to see what could be done about it. The guard dogs made a near approach to the house a risky if not dangerous undertaking. They were against doing anything, at this juncture, that might put the Count on the alert.

"We can be pretty sure of this," said Algy. "If neither Biggles nor Ginger shows up at the hangar all day we can reckon that they're under restraint."

"In that case shouldn't we try to get them out?"

"We don't know yet that it is so," Algy pointed out. "We can talk about that later. For the time being we'd better stick to the plan; stick to it for as long as possible, in fact. According to Gaskin there are more men in that house than we could take on single-handed and hope to get away with it."

With frequent halts to look and listen they reached the area of the wood they had chosen without seeing a living creature apart from the wild life to be expected. The problem now was to find a spot that commanded a view of the hangar and that part of the field adjacent to the rear premises of the house,

some seventy or eighty yards farther on. This, they thought, was close enough to be handy, yet far enough away to make the risk of discovery negligible. They had less to fear from the men, Bertie remarked, than from the dogs, with their ever-questing noses.

After hunting around for a little while they came upon what Bertie described as “just the job”. A tree—an oak, to be precise—had been wind-blown against another to form a tangle of interlacing branches to which the sloping trunk gave easy access. It was rather closer to the hangar than they would have wished, but in view of the elevated position offered by the branches they decided that it was reasonably safe, even from the dogs, which for the most part kept their noses to the ground.

Bertie went up to investigate, and was soon able to announce that he had an uninterrupted picture of the objective, due to the fact that the fallen tree was dead and the other not yet in full leaf. Upon receiving this information Algy joined him, and having found perches that were more or less comfortable they settled down for what they thought might be a long wait. However, for this they were prepared. Which was just as well, for thus it turned out to be.

The wild life of the wood resumed its interrupted occupations. Pigeons cooed. A dove continued its melodious monotone. A hen pheasant returned cautiously to her nest. A cuckoo told the world she was there. A rabbit that had escaped the deadly disease of myxomatosis ambled past, eyes watchful, ears twitching. Had it not been for the anxiety on Biggles’ account it would all have been very pleasant.

The morning wore on. The conditions remained unchanged. With the scene losing its novelty time began to drag.

However, at about twelve noon the two men in overalls, presumably air mechanics, whom Bertie had seen on his previous visit, appeared from the direction of the house. With them was the gardener type with the Alsatians. The mechanics made for the hangar, and from the casual manner in which they sauntered Algy concluded they had no particular task before them. They went into the hangar. The gardener stopped with them for a little while. Then, with his charges, began a tour of the field, he remaining on the grass while the dogs explored the fringe of the wood. Algy was glad it was only the fringe, or the animals might have picked up their taint.

Even as things were there was an uncomfortable moment when one of the dogs stopped, staring in their direction, nose held high, as if a suspicious scent had reached its nostrils. This was more than the rabbit, which had squatted, could stand; it bolted, and the dog went after it for some distance before obeying the command to come back. By that time the gardener, who had walked on, was fifty yards away, so the danger passed.

Algy looked at Bertie and grimaced. “Those confounded dogs are a menace,” he muttered.

“Are you telling me?” returned Bertie, with some warmth. “Jolly good thing we weren’t on the ground.”



Algy looked at the gardener. He was still striding on, the dogs working ahead of him as if he had no intention of returning for some time. It struck Algy that this might be the moment to look at the house, and he made a remark to that effect.

"I wouldn't go too close, old boy," warned Bertie. "If you do, when those dogs come back they'll know someone has been around."

"I shan't leave the wood," said Algy, as he started down the tree.

"Are you going to stay long?" asked Bertie.

"No. Only a minute or two."

"What are you hoping to see?"

"Some sign of Biggles. I'm getting really worried about him."

Reaching the ground Algy made his way quickly but quietly across the carpet of anemones, keeping parallel with the field, until he reached a position from which he could see first the side of the house, then the front. There was no one outside. The doors and windows were closed. The place might have been deserted. He looked hard at every window in turn, thinking that if Biggles was in the room concerned he might be looking out. But for all his trouble he learned nothing, and it was with a feeling of frustration that he returned to Bertie in the tree.

"Any luck?" asked Bertie.

"Not a sign," answered Algy. "Well, we've done all we can. There's nothing more we can do—except wait."

The vigil was resumed.

They watched the gardener, who had apparently carried out a regular patrol, return to the house by way of the far side of the field. Soon afterwards the mechanics, who had been making a certain amount of noise in the hangar, came out. They, too, walked back to the house, possibly for lunch.

"This is slow work, old boy," remarked Bertie.

Algy was tempted to take this opportunity of investigating the hangar, but prudence prevailed. He agreed with Bertie that there was not much point in it, and joined him in the less strenuous occupation of transferring his sandwiches from his pocket to his stomach. This done, there was nothing more to do.

An hour dawdled by. Another. The sun, well past its zenith, began to lengthen the shadows on the field.

"If Biggles is here, and free to do what he likes, we should have seen something of him by now," declared Algy. "He must be in that house."

"Unless he's gone home."

"That doesn't make sense to me. Why bring him here if there was nothing for him to do? Had there been any flying to be done he'd have been to the hangar."

"He may come."

"He'd have come before this. I can't see him sitting in that house all day doing nothing. I don't like the idea of him being shut up with all those crooks."

“Do you think we ought to do something about it?” queried Bertie. “After all, who are these blighters? Are we scared of a bunch of crooks?”

“It isn’t a matter of being scared,” retorted Algy. “Biggles may be playing his own game, but surely he must realize how we are bound to feel about it. The trouble is, Gaskin has the thing in hand, and if we butt in prematurely we may upset his appplecart as well as our own.”

“Absolutely, old boy,” agreed Bertie. “It’s no use snapping off at the handle.”

“Maybe we’d better wait,” concluded Algy, in a voice that revealed his state of indecision.

The afternoon dragged on, but towards five it became evident that something was about to happen when Laxter appeared with the mechanics, striding purposefully towards the hangar. They went in. After a brief delay the tail of an Auster appeared. The machine was dragged right out and swung round to face the length of the field as if it might be going to take off. Not that Algy thought this was going to happen because Laxter was not dressed for flying. Chocks were put under the wheels.

They watched Laxter get into the cockpit. The engine came to life. For a little while it was allowed to warm up, Laxter, meantime, testing the controls, as the movement of ailerons, elevators and rudder signified. One of the mechanics then went to the tail and held it down while Laxter ran up the engine in the usual way to confirm that it was giving its full power—all this, of course, being the usual procedure before an aircraft takes off.

The engine died abruptly as Laxter switched off. He jumped down. He was heard to say “She’s all right.” He lit a cigarette. Then, leaving the machine as it stood they all returned to the house.

“So now we know,” said Algy, after the trio had disappeared from sight. “That machine is going to be used presently, or at any rate tonight; and Biggles isn’t going to fly it or he’d have been along to run her up. I can’t see him flying a strange machine without first satisfying himself that it’s okay. He wouldn’t take Laxter’s word for it.”

“Absolutely,” murmured Bertie. “I couldn’t agree more. If Biggles was going to fly that kite he’d have been along to give it the once over.”

“Yet somebody’s going to fly it. Laxter, I imagine. There can’t be anyone else or he’d have been with Laxter. I don’t like the look of this at all.”

“We could prevent anyone from flying it.”

“It may come to that,” returned Algy. “What sticks in my mind is why, if Biggles isn’t to fly the machine, did they bring him here.”

“To talk to the Count, perhaps.”

“What about? The same argument applies. Why should the Count want to talk to Biggles if it was intended that someone else should fly? I like the look of this less and less. There’s something about it that doesn’t add up.”

“What do you suggest we do about it, old boy?”

“What can we do? Either we go to the house to get the answers and risk

making a mess of the whole show or we can go on sitting here and let the answers come to us.”

“It’s up to you, laddie,” averred Bertie. “I’m game for whatever you think’s best.”

Algy hesitated. “Having waited for so long I suppose we might as well hang on a bit longer,” he decided. “I wish Gaskin would show up. I told him where we’d be. There isn’t a sign of him, or his men.”

“We can rely on him to do his stuff.”

“I’m not doubting that. But when and how will he do it? This business wears a different look from what it did when the plan was made. Then we were only concerned with buttoning up this gang of crooks. Frankly, I’m now far more concerned about Biggles and Ginger.”

Silence fell. More time passed. The sun was now sinking into the horizon. The shadows stretched far across the field. Dusk began to dim the distant scene.

“Hark,” said Algy.

Somewhere near the house a car had been started. Listening, they heard it move a little way, stop. Doors slammed. Then it moved on again, the purr of the engine fading in the distance.

“There they go,” said Algy softly. “That must have been the Daimler. It went from the garage to the front of the house, picked up the gang and is now on its way to London.”

“On a crib-cracking expedition.”

“What else?”

“This is where Gaskin should get busy.”

“I hope so, for if he misses the boat Laxter’s all set to fly the swag to France.”

“Gaskin may intercept them.”

“The idea was for Gaskin to let them all come back to the house before jumping on them, so that he could rope in the Count. But whatever Gaskin does,” concluded Algy grimly, “I’m not letting that plane leave here tonight.”

“Jolly good,” said Bertie. “I shan’t be sorry to get off this beastly perch. I’m no dicky-bird. I’m as stiff as a blooming board.”

Somewhere, not far away, an owl hooted, as if it might have been in derision.

# CHAPTER XV

## THE END OF THE TRAIL

NIGHT fell.

The final notes of the last bird-song died away to a silence that was profound. The vanguard of the stars appeared in the deep vault of heaven. By the end of an hour the main host had taken up their positions and the moon was holding a shining sabre above the ragged fringe of treetops.

Another hour, and still the purr of the returning car had not been heard, which brought from Algy the whispered observation that it was probably waiting for the robbers to finish their work in order to bring them home.

It was almost a relief when a figure appeared from the direction of the house, walking briskly towards the hangar, or the aircraft that stood before it with its surfaces glistening faintly in the half-light. Very soon the figure was observed to be Laxter. He carried a suitcase in each hand. These he put in the Auster. He then turned and walked back to the house.

“What do you make of that?” breathed Bertie.

“It confirms what I suspected. He’s going to fly the machine.”

“Why two suitcases?”

“Somebody must be going with him. The Count, probably. Neither of the suitcases was Biggles’! When that machine takes off he won’t be in it.”

“Will they leave Biggles in the house?”

“I don’t know. I wouldn’t think so. I’m worried sick,” admitted Algy.

“What on earth is Gaskin doing? Where are all these men he was going to put round the house? If his watcher hasn’t let him down he must know the gang is on the job.”

Bertie did not answer.

At nearly midnight, with the moon well up and gleaming brightly from a sky still clear of cloud, they heard the car come back. They heard it from a long way off, travelling at a speed that denoted urgency, presently to be confirmed by the hasty and careless slamming of car doors when it arrived at the house. But after this short burst of activity silence again fell, although this, as events were to prove, was the lull before the storm.

“What do you suppose they’re doing now?” said Bertie, after several minutes had passed.

“Looking at the loot, with the Count paying the gang for what they’ve got,” answered Algy. “Stand by for a quick move. Things are likely to happen at any moment now, and when they do it’s my guess they’ll happen fast.”

In this he was right. Indeed, they happened faster than he expected.

Laxter appeared, striding swiftly, the mechanics with him. He was now in flying kit and carried a small case. He went straight to the Auster and got in. The mechanics stood back against the hangar, watching, and thus the situation

remained for a minute or two.

"It's time we moved nearer," Algy whispered to Bertie. "If we wait for Laxter to start up we may be too late. Careful. No noise."

Straddling the trunk of the leaning tree they made their way to the ground and then moved forward to the edge of the wood at a speed as fast as noiselessness permitted. There they stopped, tense, ready for what they knew must be the final act of the drama. Nobody moved. Nobody spoke. The hush carried the brittle quality of a time bomb.

Then through the silence came a sound that caused Algy's nerves to twitch before laying a cold hand on his heart. Two gunshots, muffled, fired in quick succession. Hard on this came a clash of gears as the car was started. It moved away. For a moment the reflection of its headlights could be seen on the rhododendrons as it went down the drive.

An instant later Carlton appeared, walking quickly. He wore an overcoat and carried an attaché case.

As he neared the aircraft, Laxter, who had evidently been watching, put his head out of the cockpit and said: "Everything all right?"

The count answered: "Yes. I shot them both. There was nothing else we could do with them."

"What about the car?" asked Laxter.

"I've told the boys they can have it and do what they like with it. They're on their way back to Town. Are you ready?"

"Yes, I'm ready."

"All right. Just a minute." Carlton took from his pocket two packets of what evidently was money, for as he handed one to each of the mechanics he said: "There you are. You'll find that correct and a little over. Get away from here as soon as you can and forget everything." Turning, he walked towards the aircraft. At the same time the starter whirled and the airscrew sprang to life.

With the sound of the two revolver shots in his ears Algy had stood like a man who had lost the use of his limbs. But now, he, too, came to life with a rush. "This is it," he rasped. "Come on. Stop 'em. If they get off we'll never see them again."

With their guns in their hands they dashed out of the bushes instantly to be involved in a state of wildest confusion.

Algy may have forgotten that the starting of the engine was to be the signal for Gaskin to launch his attack. If he remembered he ignored it. The one thought in his head was to prevent the machine from getting away. Subconsciously he heard a police whistle shrill. Vaguely he was aware of figures, running, converging on the aircraft. He paid no attention to them.

What was happening must instantly have been apparent to both Laxter and the Count, and each behaved as might have been expected. The Auster started to move, Laxter clearly determined to save himself without the slightest regard for the Count who, seeing that he was being abandoned ran after the

machine crying out to Laxter to stop. He could have saved his breath. Behind both of them raced Algy, furious with himself for having, as he feared, left his move until too late.

But Bertie now came into the picture. As soon as the rising bellow of the engine told him what was about to happen he had cut across to get in front of the machine. He had to jump sideways to avoid being struck by the airscrew, but ducking under the wing he seized the Vee strut at the root and strove desperately to swing the machine round towards the wood as the most effective way of stopping it. In this he was only partly successful, for the engine was running on full throttle. Seeing that he must in a moment be dragged off his feet he fired a shot at the nearest tyre, and even in the act of falling, another. He struck the ground with some force without knowing whether or not his shots had found their mark.

Scrambling to his knees he soon saw that they had, for the aircraft was careering round, bumping, in the sort of swerve that must result from trying to make flying speed with a flat tyre. Watching, it seemed to him that Laxter, still resolved to escape, was trying to get the machine on its one good wheel; and he did manage to get the machine more or less on even keel. But the aircraft, just short of sufficient speed for such a manoeuvre, dropped back, and that proved fatal. The loose tyre may have caused the wheel to seize up. At all events, the machine did a short violent swerve as if trying to turn in its own length, at the end of which it turned a somersault and burst into flames.

During this period, the Count, seeing that he had no hope of overtaking the machine, had set off at a run across the open field, although what he hoped to gain by that was not apparent; for Algy raced after him, calling on him to stop. The Count obeyed, and the answer Algy got was two pistol shots, one of which whistled uncomfortably close. It may be that by this means the Count hoped to delay the pursuit; but the moment he turned Algy was after him again, ready to take evasive action should there be any more shooting. For this he would be prepared if the Count stopped again. He was close enough to the Count to have hit him with a shot from his own gun, but he hesitated to take a step so drastic even though the Count had invited it. Instead, he fired a shot over the fugitive's head, his intention being to warn him that he, too, was armed. To his dismay, not to say surprise, he saw the Count falter, slow down to a walk and then sink to the ground.

Wondering how he had hit him Algy ran up, to find the man apparently dead, or at any rate unconscious. He was not sure which. He could see no wound. Hardly knowing what to do for the best, half dazed by the speed of events, he turned to look for help, thinking perhaps Bertie had followed him. He saw the plane blazing. In its lurid light he saw a man running towards him. It was not Bertie. "Who are you?" he challenged.

"I'm one of Inspector Gaskin's men," was the reply. "I thought you might need help."

Algy pointed to the Count, still lying as he had fallen. "We exchanged

shots,” he explained. “I must have hit him, although I don’t know how. Do what you can for him.”

“Right. Leave him to me.”

Algy ran on towards the hangar looking for Bertie, and saw him returning from the crash. “Have you seen Gaskin?” he shouted.

“No, but he must be about because his men are here. Some of ‘em have gone to the crash.”

“He must be at the house,” said Algy tersely. “Let’s go over.”

He turned and started to run, only to pull up short, clutching Bertie by the arm. “Look!” he cried in a strangled voice. “It’s on fire.” And with that, in a state near frenzy, for he had not forgotten the pistol shots, he raced towards it.

Reaching the building he made for the nearest door, which, from his angle of approach, was the back. He almost collided with Gaskin, who came charging round from the front. “Have you seen Biggles?” he yelled.

“No,” answered Gaskin. “Wasn’t it him who started the plane?”

“No. He isn’t out there. Nor is Ginger. They must be in this house.” Algy rushed on to the door. It was locked. He hurled his weight against it. He made no impression.

“Mind your back!” cried Gaskin, and flung his sixteen stone against the door, shoulder first. Three times he had to repeat this before the door gave way. As it burst open smoke poured out.

Holding his handkerchief over his mouth and nose Algy groped his way in, and at once became aware of a great noise of hammering. In the darkness and the smoke it was impossible to locate. He found a door. He opened it, only to recoil from the flames that leapt out at him.

Somewhere Bertie was shouting. “It’s this way! Over here!”

Algy blundered towards him. He could hear voices calling, and Gaskin answering, but in the blinding, choking smoke, it was impossible to make out whence they came. He found Bertie groping his way along a wall from some part of which still came the frantic hammering. He joined him. His hands found a door. He groped for the handle and struck his knuckles on a key. He turned it, and with his senses reeling pulled it open. Two figures stumbled out, nearly knocking him over.

“Is that you, Biggles?” he choked.

“Yes,” gasped Biggles.

Gaskin was bawling, asking where they were. Algy answered and the Inspector came to their assistance. “This way,” he shouted.

Algy stumbled and fell over something soft that lay on the floor. Picking himself up his hands came in contact with hair. By feel he identified the object as a dog, one of the Alsations, presumably dead, since it did not move. In the sudden light of a burst of flame he swayed on after the others.

Somehow they all managed to find the open door, through which they fell, gasping. In various degrees of exhaustion they emptied their lungs of smoke, backing away from the heat of the fast-spreading fire. It was a minute or two

before anyone spoke. Then it was Gaskin who blurted: "My godfathers, Bigglesworth, you nearly went too far that time. You'll never have a closer squeak than that."

"You're telling me," answered Biggles, ruefully, mopping his face with a dirty handkerchief.

"And me," muttered Ginger. "I've thought of several ways of dying but I never expected to be smoked like a perishing haddock."

"I thought you'd had it, anyway," asserted Algy. "Those two pistol shots, to me, could only mean one thing."

"We heard them," said Biggles curiously. "What were they about? For a few seconds we were kidding ourselves Gaskin had arrived."

"The Count shot the dogs," said Algy. "I heard him say to Laxter I shot them both, and, of course, I thought he was referring to you. He was pulling out and apparently didn't want to take them with him."

"That was no excuse for shooting them, the swine," growled Bertie.

"Would somebody mind telling me what's happened here, after all this?" requested Biggles.

The position, as it was understood, was explained.

"That all sounds like good news to me," asserted Biggles.

"What happened to you?" asked Gaskin.

Biggles smiled sadly. "Quite simple. The Count had worked out who we were and sent Laxter to bring us down for a party."

"I saw you in the car with him," put in Bertie.

"So that was it," murmured Biggles. "Well, it was always on the boards that they'd rumble me. We knew that from the beginning. The whole bunch was here; Noble, Norman, that smash and grab team—the lot. Where are they, by the way?"

"I can answer for Noble, Norman, Dusty and his pals," replied Gaskin. "They did what you reckoned they'd do. There were two jobs; a smash and grab at a jeweller's shop in Kensington and a raid on a film star's flat in Mayfair. The Daimler waited for 'em and brought 'em back here for the carve-up. Knowing they wouldn't be likely to stay the night we waited for 'em to come out and popped 'em in the bag. They're now on their way to London in the van."

Algy looked at Biggles. "I wonder why they didn't shoot you?"

"Why need they? Bullets in a body can be found. What the Count did, had it come off, would have been just as effective and left no traces of murder."

"Talking of the Count, what puzzles me is how I hit him," said Algy. "I could have sworn I fired well over his head."

"What's the odds?" growled Gaskin. "This way it saves everyone a heap of trouble and expense. He asked for what he got."

"You're dead right," muttered Ginger. "I've worn my fingers to the bone trying to cut a hole through that door. Might have done it, too, given a little more time. The wine just about kept us on our feet till you heard us



hammering.”

“How so?” asked Gaskin.

“When the smoke started to drift in under the door we soaked our handkerchiefs with it and held them over our faces.”

“Well, that’s one way of using wine,” said Gaskin. “There’s nothing we can do about this,” he went on, jerking a thumb at the now blazing house. “When I saw what was happening I sent a man to Hertford for the fire brigade, but by the time it gets here there won’t be much for it to do. Let’s see what’s happening on the field.”

They walked towards it. On the way they met a police sergeant. He was carrying the Count’s attaché case.

“The stuff’s all here, sir,” he reported. “There must be twenty or thirty thousand pounds in notes, too. It would have been a nice haul if he’d got away with it.”

“Is he dead?” asked Algy.

“Dead as mutton. He must have died o’ shock. I couldn’t find a bullet hole anywhere or I’d have rushed him to the county hospital.”

“What about those two mechanics?”

“We’ve got ‘em. They just stood still, quiet as lambs.”

“What’s everyone doing now?” asked Gaskin.

“Waiting for orders. A couple are taking the two mechanics to the cars, and some of the others are carrying the Count’s body over. The rest are standing waiting for the plane to burn itself out. We’d nothing to put it out with.”

“Did Laxter manage to get out?” inquired Algy.

“No. We could hear him hollering but we couldn’t get near him for the heat,” answered the police officer, with calm indifference.

“Well, that’s what he tried to do to a man who thought he was a friend,” said Biggles quietly. “I’m beginning to think there must be such a thing as just retribution.”

“What are you fellers going to do?” Gaskin put the question to Biggles.

“Do you want us here for anything?”

“No. It seems to be all over bar the cleaning up.”

“In that case we’ll get along home,” decided Biggles. He smiled lugubriously. “I feel I could do with a complete overhaul.”

“I’ll bet you do,” averred Gaskin. “See you at the Yard later on to compare notes and help me complete the file on the case. There’ll be quite a bit to do. That bunch we picked up in the Daimler were all carrying a tidy wad of notes which they must have got from the Count. I only had time to glance at the numbers, but if my memory is right we’ve been looking for those notes for some time. Part of a bank robbery. The Count may have organized that in his spare time. See you later.” Gaskin walked on. Biggles and the others made their way to the lane where a police car gave them a lift to Waterford where Algy had left their own car. It was still there.

Talking about the events of the past forty-eight hours they returned, worn

out, unshaven and dishevelled, but well satisfied with the night's work, to the flat in Mount Street.

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A comparison of notes with Gaskin over the next two or three days yielded little that they did not know. A post-mortem examination revealed that the Count had not died from a bullet wound, as Algy had supposed, but in fact from a heart-attack, no doubt the result of shock, or exertion in his attempt to escape. Thus, in the end he died as he once faked his death. The notes, both in the attaché case and in the pockets of the gang, were, as Gaskin had suspected, the proceeds of a bank robbery some weeks earlier.

One rather humorous aspect of the final jewel robbery in Mayfair was this. The film star, to her astonishment, had her jewels returned to her, intact, before she knew they had been stolen. She had been away for the night, as the gang may have been aware. As film stars are always news the story was soon in the newspapers, with the result, to Gaskin's gratification, the Yard got a pat on the back for a change, instead of the usual criticism from the insurance company.

"Thanks to you," he told Biggles.

"Not at all," argued Biggles. "You had the hunch and it was right on the beam. We merely did the donkey work."

"Like to do some more?" questioned Gaskin, grinning.

"No thanks," returned Biggles. "A little of that sort of thing goes a long way. I like to sleep sometimes. And I don't care much for the atmosphere of places like the Barn."

"That's what I mean," said the Inspector, sadly. "Ah well, the Barn has lost some of its customers, but I reckon it's all to the good."

THE END